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Twice-Exceptional College Students Narratives: When Giftedness And Mental Health Intersect

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TWICE-EXCEPTIONAL COLLEGE STUDENTS NARRATIVES: WHEN
GIFTEDNESS AND MENTAL HEALTH INTERSECT

by

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Bachelor of Arts, University of North Dakota, 2008

Master of Arts, University of North Dakota, 2011

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Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

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for the degree of

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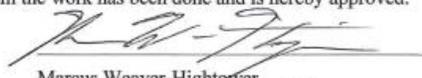
Educational Foundations and Research

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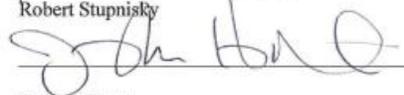
This dissertation, submitted by Emily DuBord Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy from the University of North Dakota, has been read by the Faculty Advisory Committee under whom the work has been done and is hereby approved.



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Dean of the School of Graduate Studies

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PERMISSION

Title Twice-Exceptional College Students Narratives: When Giftedness and
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Emily DuBord Hill

May 4, 2020

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Lastly, I am grateful for all my participants who bravely shared their stories of what it is like to be a twice-exceptional individual. Your voices are moving and beautiful and inspire me to keep working to bring more of these stories into the light.

ABSTRACT

Gifted college students often arrive at universities with high GPAs and/or ACT/SAT scores. Their achievements in extracurricular activities such as in the arts, athletics, service, and leadership are well beyond the average student. To admissions representatives and faculty, these students look well-adjusted and successful on paper. However, many of these gifted college students come with unique challenges that go misunderstood, ignored, and underserved during their years in higher education—specifically involving their mental health.

There are copious amounts of literature on gifted K-12 students and their mental health behaviors but very limited research done on the gifted college student population. Although gifted research declines after the twelfth grade, giftedness does not end as those students age. Along with being gifted, some of these individuals also experience mental health issues throughout their lifetimes. When giftedness and mental health overlap, the individual is considered twice-exceptional. Twice-exceptionality includes physical and learning disabilities, but the term can also describe a person who has a mental health diagnosis that coincides with their giftedness.

Because twice-exceptional individuals tend to mask their mental health issues very well, it is difficult to identify that they need support—especially when they are in college. With my professional experience in honors education, I came to realize some of these twice-exceptional college experiences and stories have never been heard. The purpose of my dissertation is to bring these narratives into the light with the hopes of

more widespread understanding of their specific needs. In order to understand the trends and challenges of twice-exceptional college students, I present a literature review as well as identify research gaps. Using a qualitative research design, I shape interview questions for my participants that illustrate their past experiences with growing up as twice-exceptional along with their present journeys as twice-exceptional college students. I use narrative and discourse analysis to bring their experiences and voices together in conversation with one another to give readers a clearer picture of what it is like to be a twice-exceptional college student. As a result of this analysis, my study culminates in better understanding the twice-exceptional student experience in terms of their behaviors, academic performance, social lives, and the intersectionality of their gender. My participants also gave insight into how universities can better support this student population through honors education programs, holistic academic advising, counseling and support groups, as well as more flexibility and understanding from university administration, faculty, and staff.

CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION
Growing up Gifted

In 2004, I remember walking into my first college honors class feeling nervous about not being smart enough compared to the other students. I was considered the “smart girl” in elementary through high school, but I knew being part of a college honors program would be a completely different experience. I no longer would be the highest achiever in the class—a thought that was equal parts daunting and comforting. The honors students filled the classroom with lively discussion and critical debate over important topics that impacted the world around us. Instead of the professor lecturing, he treated the class as if it were a graduate seminar. We, the honors students, were primarily responsible for cultivating the active learning environment. That first honors class challenged us to develop our perspectives, fine tune our critical inquiry skills, and write for academic audiences. Some of us even experienced the difficult but important lesson of what it is like to receive a B on a paper—it’s not failure even though it feels like it.

For the first time in my life, I felt like I found my “people.” Most of my honors peers were categorized as gifted during their K-12 education, whether it was from formalized testing or teacher recommendations for accelerated learning programs. As with many gifted and talented kids, we knew what it was like to be labeled as a “geek” or “nerd.” We were outsiders among other peers. The feeling of being an outsider manifested in various ways: bullied for being smart, isolated for being different, and

pressured to do well in school from internal and external forces. As the college years went on and close friendships formed, some of us discovered another commonality—many of us struggled with our mental health. We were high achieving students, but we were high achieving students with anxiety, depression, bipolar disorder, and other mental illnesses. At that time, mental health was not something people spoke about freely with others—especially in the Midwest where the common mantra is still “pull yourself up by your bootstraps.” Most of the time, if we did talk about our mental health experiences, we expressed it in the form of feeling stressed about our academics and what graduate school applications we should fill out. A few of my college friends were diagnosed with mental health issues and coped with medication and therapy. Some later discovered they were on the wrong medication or misdiagnosed, which caused them to cope by using unhealthy amounts of alcohol instead. Others went undiagnosed due to cultural stigma of mental health interventions as well as the overwhelming feeling that if we are gifted/highly intelligent, we should be able to handle mental health on our own—essentially think our way out of it.

Unfortunately, I was one of the gifted individuals who tried to control their mental health by overachieving through it. After researching gifted children with mental health as a doctoral student, I came to realize that I probably struggled with depression and anxiety even as a child and teenager. I was a typical gifted kid—walked early, read early, played with an overly vivid imagination, and excelled in various academic areas such as English, science, and music (Woolfolk, 2013). However, I remember having existential and metacognitive thoughts that terrified me as a little girl and kept me up at night, such as “What is death like?”, “When am I going to die?”, and “How do you know if heaven is

real?” Endlessly, I would have long critical discussions with my parents about death and God. As with many gifted children, I was overly sensitive to most things and easily cried because of uncertainty or embarrassment if someone made a harmless joke or looked at me in a different way.

School was a constant trigger for unhealthy perfectionism. I would obsess over math problems to the point of crying since I did not understand why math did not come as easily to me as everything else. The diaries I kept as a teenager are filled with New Years’ resolutions to stop incessantly worrying and complaints of my stomach hurting all the time. During my junior year of high school, I brought my ten-pound AP Biology textbook everywhere I went, just in case I would have five spare minutes to study. I was highly disciplined and competitive with my extracurricular activities such as speech, band, orchestra, piano lessons, and National Honor Society. Elementary school was difficult due to bullying by my classmates for being the “smart girl” but by high school, I developed strong friendships with other social misfits who hung out in the music department. Despite all my successful moments, I was afraid of failure which caused a lot of self-inflicted stress, anxiety, depression, and stomach pain.

Although these symptoms continued through college, I did have moments of ease since I finally found a core group of friends who also struggled with being gifted and having mental health issues. For the first time, I was not considered an outsider anymore and became less isolated. I became more outgoing, had numerous friends, and even got voted onto homecoming court (something I would have never dreamed about happening in high school). I maintained a 4.0 grade point average even though the courses were

more challenging. For the most part, my undergraduate experience was a time of growth in self-confidence and identity cultivation.

It wasn't until I started my master's program that my depression and anxiety brought me to a breaking point. My graduate classes were more work than I ever imagined, and my peers were competitive but not in a kind way. I was always reading difficult English theory and I was constantly telling myself I was not cut out for graduate school—despite the fact I was somehow achieving A's. No longer did I live in the residence halls where I was just a door away from friends. I lived in graduate student housing which happened to be almost too quiet and isolating. During this time of transition, I isolated myself from my graduate school peers in order to protect the little self-confidence I had left, cried almost every day over my readings, and did not leave my apartment unless I had class or had to teach. With the help of my family and friends, I finally received help through seeing a counselor regularly and went on an antidepressant for the first time in my life. Getting on medication was a difficult process since it takes a while to find the right kind and dosage. I also feared my personality drastically changing to the point where I did not feel anything. Luckily, I was able to get my life back on track with the combination of counseling, mild medication, and living abroad teaching for a semester. By the time I graduated with my master's degree, my mind felt the most at peace than it ever experienced. It made me wonder what my life would have looked like if I discovered this road to healing my mind earlier.

Arriving at Twice-Exceptional Research

It wasn't until I began working with gifted college students as an instructor and academic advisor in honors programs that I started to pay attention to a pattern with

giftedness and mental health—I saw my past struggles within my own students. With each new academic year, more and more students would come to me during office hours and reveal their struggles with anxiety, depression, eating disorders, bipolar disorder, and even thoughts of suicide despite the fact that many of them were still high achieving with their academic goals. I walked many students over to the counseling center and sat in lobby while they completed their first mental health screening. I became a frequent caller to the housing office on campus to ask the student-life professionals to do wellness checks for students of concern in the evenings and weekends. At first, I was surprised at my students' openness about their experiences of mental health, but I gradually observed there was a shift happening with mental health awareness with the new generation of college students.

There is a “mixed blessing” of being a gifted student at a university (Streznewski, 1999, p. 111). On the positive end, “Gifted college students are often able to quickly learn new information, comprehend complex and abstract ideas, identify complicated patterns, and make multidisciplinary connections” (Johnsen, 2004; Plominski & Burns, 2018, p. 7; Rinn & Bishop, 2015; Robinson, 1997; Roeper, 1991). Some students even experience high levels of motivation and persistence throughout their college careers because of their giftedness (Hérbert & McBee, 2007; Plominski & Burns, 2018). Along with high levels of motivation, they can also experience intense satisfaction and joy. For the most part, “the upside of feeling all feelings to the ‘nth degree’ is that the natural highs are higher, are more blissful, and are felt far more fully than those that others experience. The down side is that the lows are also more intense” (Daniels & Piechowski, 2009, p. 168). Therefore, not everything is easy when you are a gifted college student.

When gifted individuals reach college, they are faced with a unique array of problems that some of their nongifted peers may not experience. Many gifted college students,

are comfortable with, and perhaps dependent upon, the strategies and support networks that have allowed them to achieve pre-collegiate educational success. Removing these supports and encountering increased competition may lead to unique problems that the majority of undergraduates never encounter. (Rinn & Plucker, 2004, p. 62)

For some gifted students, when these specialized gifted education services are taken away at the college level, this can cause the transition to be jarring. One of Streznewski's (1999) interviewees expressed they wished there had been better counseling services at their institutions to assist them with their emotional well-being as a gifted person. Some expressed how their peers criticized their intellect, even a few professors. Gifted college students tend to be more critical of their performance than others, which results in putting too much self-generated pressure on their academic workloads.

Gifted students often arrive at universities with high GPAs and/or ACT/SAT scores. Their achievements in extracurricular activities such as in the arts, athletics, service, and leadership are well beyond the average student. To admissions representatives and faculty, these students look well-adjusted and successful on paper. These are the students university marketing experts place on billboards, brochures, and social media stories. In many ways,

the conventional wisdom appears to be that, although the intellectual progress of all college students is important, the attitudes and accomplishments of the most

talented students help to improve an institution's academic atmosphere and differentiate a university from its peer institutions. (Rinn & Plucker, 2004, p. 54)

However, many of these gifted college students come with unique challenges that go misunderstood and underserved during their years in higher education—specifically involving their mental health.

Throughout my research on giftedness, I found there are copious amounts of literature on gifted K-12 students and their mental health behaviors but very limited research done on the gifted college student population (Conejeros-Solar & Gómez-Arízaga, 2015; Maldaglio, 2013; Plominski & Burns, 2018; Rinn & Plucker, 2004; Rinn, 2005; Rinn & Plucker, 2019). According to N. M. Robinson (1997), “attention to the gifted learner at the college level represents uncharted territory and a new frontier” (p. 217). Although gifted research declines after the twelfth grade, giftedness does not end as they age (Hébert & McBee, 2007; Rinn & Plucker, 2019). Webb et al. (2015) writes that when there is “...an overlap between giftedness and a particular diagnostic category, then a person is considered to be ‘twice-exceptional’” (p. 31). Kerr and McKay (2014) also offer a concise definition of twice-exceptionality: “...those who have a disability but are also gifted” (p. 225). This includes physical disabilities but the term most often describes a person who has a learning disability or a mental health diagnosis that coincides with their giftedness.

Since the current research about twice-exceptional college students is limited, there is ample room for studying the experiences of this demographic. With my own experience working with this student population as well as being a twice-exceptional individual myself, my research questions developed: What is the twice-exceptional

college student experience? What are their strengths? What are their challenges? What more could higher education institutions be doing to ensure the success of their twice-exceptional students? Through research and data collection from my participants, I found there is a growing need in the population for proper outlets to connect with other twice-exceptional peers as well as a call for more nuanced understanding about gifted students with mental health problems from their professors, advisors, and other campus professional staff. Although many of these students continue to do well academically, their experience living with mental health issues while in college can be consuming and isolating. These high-achieving students are the ones that give universities bragging rights, but they are not often cared for holistically. They are seen for their achievements but not always asked “How are you really doing with all of this overachieving? How are you doing socially on campus? What are your challenges?” For many in the twice-exceptional population, “they find themselves concealing who they are—knowing how different they are from others—marking time, and waiting for a time when they can be themselves in surroundings where they can feel psychologically safe” (Daniels & Piechowski, 2009, p. 168). If there was more time spent asking them questions like these, universities may find that with proper programming and services, this population may achieve to a higher degree academically as well as personally.

In order to understand the trends and challenges of twice-exceptional college students, I present a literature review as well as identify research gaps. Using a qualitative research design, I shape interview questions for my participants that illustrate their past experiences with growing up twice-exceptional along with their present journeys as twice-exceptional college students. Using their stories, I used narrative and discourse

analysis not only to give these individuals a voice but also an opportunity to join into conversation with one another. My study cumulates in better understanding the twice-exceptional student experience as well as how universities can better serve these students.

CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW
Gifted: The Indefinable

Before diving into twice-exceptional literature, I will explain the concept of giftedness. The term “gifted” does not have a concrete definition, but it does have some reoccurring features. When scholars began studying gifted individuals, it was common to use IQ as a measure for giftedness (Clinkenbeard, 2012; Renzulli, 1978; Terman, Baldwin, & Bronson, 1925; Woolfolk, 2013). In present day, however, IQ measurements are not the only or best evidence for detecting giftedness since research has shown that giftedness is not necessarily synonymous with intelligence (Makel, Snyder, Thomas, Malone, & Putallaz, 2015).

Two definitions of giftedness provide a broader spectrum of understanding. Rinn (2012) includes a definition developed by the National Association for Gifted Children:

The term gifted and talented student means children and youths who give evidence of higher performance capability in such areas as intellectual, creative, artistic, or leadership capacity, or in specific academic fields, and who require services or activities not ordinarily provided by the schools in order to develop such capabilities fully. (p. 206)

This is an imperative scope of giftedness educators need to understand because not only does it recognize that gifted individuals score high in academics, but they can also shine in other areas such as artistic and leadership endeavors. Additionally, the definition recognizes that gifted individuals, although above average in many things, also need outreach services in order to continue to positively develop and not hit stagnation. In a more recent definition of giftedness featured in Rinn and Bishop's (2015) article was a definition developed by Subotnik et al. (2011):

Giftedness (a) reflects the values of society; (b) is typically manifested in actual outcomes, especially in adulthood; (c) is specific to domains of endeavor; (d) is the result of the coalescing of biological, pedagogical, psychological, and psychosocial factors; and (e) is relative not just to the ordinary (e.g., a child with exceptional art ability compared to peers) but to the extraordinary (e.g. an artist who revolutionizes a field of art). (213)

There are two aspects of this definition that are particularly useful. First, giftedness reflects the values of society. Society changes its values from generation to generation, from culture to culture. Because societal values are malleable, definitions of giftedness change as well. Secondly, this definition emphasizes that giftedness is not merely something that children are born with and cease to be when they grow into adulthood. Giftedness is on a developmental continuum. Streznewski (1999) describes the process of the gifted child growing into adulthood best when she writes,

The high-powered brain/mind that drives a gifted person's life does not switch to low gear simply because the body ages or some chronological milestone has been

reached. The persistence of curiosity, the need for stimulation, and the drive to do things does not fade. (Kane, 2009, p. 201)

Hence, nurturing and assessing gifted individuals should continue throughout their lifetime, not just during childhood. This emphasizes the need for more research on gifted college students and their special needs in order to help them positively develop throughout their lifetime. For my study, I rely on the definition of giftedness that Subotnik et al. (2011) generated in order to research giftedness as a malleable experience that continues through adulthood since my participants entering early adulthood.

The book *Bright Adults: Uniqueness and Belonging Across the Lifespan* (Fiedler, 2015), provides a thorough look into the lives of gifted individuals throughout their adulthood. The section discussing gifted young adulthood was particularly useful for understanding the gifted college student demographic. Erik Erikson's book *Childhood and Society*, influenced Fiedler when developing her own stages of adulthood. Erikson's first stage of adulthood is between ages 18 to 35 and is called young adulthood. This stage is "...characterized by concerns with intimacy versus isolation" (Fiedler, 2015, p. 217). Fiedler takes this stage a step further by dividing it up into two stages: Seekers (ages 18-25) and Voyagers (ages 25-35) (p. 4). Since traditional college students are around the ages of 18-25, my literature review will focus on the seeker stage; however, I want to note that not everyone goes through these prescribed stages in order or even gets to a particular stage in development depending on their life experiences. But for individuals who are in the seeker stage, they are exiting high school, usually entering college, starting graduate school, and/or beginning their careers. It is usually an exciting time for seekers since many are trying to figure out who they are as adults. Many have

experienced isolation in high school since they were always waiting for their classmates to catch up with their cognitive abilities and psychosocial needs (Daniels & Piechowski, 2009; Fiedler, 2015; Hébert & McBee, 2007). It is common for these gifted students to develop troubling existential thoughts about the world they live in that may not be on the radar of their fellow classmates—which often causes ostracization (Hébert & McBee, 2007). Some felt bored during their K-12 experiences and are ready for the challenge college or their first careers will present to them.

Although the challenge of their university courses may be fulfilling for some gifted students, others may feel the added pressure from parents, educators, and friends about what they should be doing with their futures since they are so “bright.” This often results in feelings of conflict about what they should study and what they should do with their future careers because they have so many strong areas of ability (Fielder, 2015, p. 41-44). The transition into college is possibly the first time they have been exposed to a variety of careers that they never considered since they have always had the message of what they “should do” in the back of their head—careers for “smart people” that contribute to the greater good (i.e. medicine, law, engineering, etc.) (Daniels & Piechowski, 2009).

Another stage of gifted young adulthood development is “merger” (Streznewski, 1999, p. 106). Those at the merger stage are finally at the state in their development where they are building relationship and friendship skills. This is a difficult transition for many gifted college students since they “may have to search far and wide to find others who share their sometimes esoteric interests or even find someone who laughs at their sometimes quirky jokes” (Daniels & Piechowski, 2009, p. 170). Even if some of these

students have the option of taking part in an honors program at their universities, the transition to finding these connections can be difficult. A possible reason for this is,

only about 5% of the population is thought to include gifted individuals...when the myriad of differences within the gifted population are taken into consideration, the probability of gifted individuals finding each other diminishes even further. (Daniels and Piechowski, 2009, p. 170)

Again, most gifted individuals are only accelerated in one or a few areas. For example, if one gifted college student with intense interests in Cold War history meets another gifted college student who is a math wiz, this does not necessarily make an automatic friendship. Hence, even if gifted college students are in programs with other gifted students, this does not always fix the problem of isolation from peers.

Lastly, these individuals may advance to the seeker stage, which means they are realizing how many opportunities are out there for their futures (p. 106). They might pursue a few of their interests before settling on a career. They may be looking for stable marriage or romantic relationships. Being a merger or a seeker is not necessarily an either/or situation for gifted young adults—some experience both or neither of these stages (Streznewski, 1999, p. 106).

Streznewski (1999) identifies three specific tasks gifted young adults seem to have before they reach the age of 30:

- 1) to recognize their difference and learn to value themselves because of it, not in spite of it;
- 2) to allow themselves to meet their needs by more intense work, more school, a better job, or trying new things; and

3) to avoid the scattering effects of too much of task 2. (Streznewski, 1999, p. 108)

However, Streznewski does not suggest that all 30-year-olds must accomplish these tasks. The twenties are a time where great accomplishment can occur for the gifted, however, lack of being comfortable with their identity and being too scattered with their interests can leave them in a continuing state of seeker and merger into their thirties. Without appropriate gifted student outreach programs at higher education institutions, these students may find it difficult to discover their goals and accomplish them.

Dabrowski's Theory of Positive Disintegration and Overexcitabilities

In order to further understand gifted individuals and their behaviors, I turn to a pivotal theory that continues to shape modern gifted research—Dabrowski's theory of positive disintegration and overexcitabilities (Dabrowski, 1964; Daniels & Piechowski, 2009). Kazimierz Dabrowski (1902-1980) was a Polish physician, psychiatrist, and psychologist who also held a master's degree in education. His career was highly influenced by witnessing several traumatic incidents during his youth—the death of a younger sister, walking through the aftermath of gruesome battlefield near his home during World War I, and his best friend committing suicide during college. During his career, he studied self-destructive behaviors and the emotional development of gifted youth (Dabrowski, 1964; Daniels & Piechowski, 2009). As his research evolved, he noticed gifted individuals experienced moments of internal conflict and struggle that was often viewed as negative from outside perspectives. However, after further observation of gifted youth, he realized the ebb and flow of these seemingly negative experiences lead to positive moments of development, or, positive disintegration. For Dabrowski,

Disintegration means breakdown, collapse, ruin, but it also means dismantling as a prelude to construction and subsequent creation at a higher level. If we think of the self as having many parts working together, we are relying on a concept of order or structure. Things can and do change in the self, as they do everywhere else in life. As a result of great loss, grief, and despair, one may experience an inner fragmentation, a collapse, even a breakdown...Dabrowski viewed human development in completely different terms—that is, as powered by the tension between the higher and the lower, the good and the bad, experienced within the self...For Dabrowski, human development was characterized by reflection, self-evaluation, and the urge for inner transformation. (Daniels & Piechowski, 2009, p. 6-7)

In other words, Dabrowski believed the many characteristics of the gifted individual—the challenges and successes—were all opportunities for lifelong development. Dabrowski (1964) writes, “disintegration is described as positive when it enriches life, enlarges the horizon, and brings forth creativity; it is negative when it either has no developmental effects or causes involution” (p. 8). Although some of this positive development can happen organically for the individual, sometimes the gifted individual going through positive disintegration needs resources and support to successfully develop. This can become more difficult when a gifted person with mental health issues leaves the K-12 educational system and starts to navigate the world without readily available services. Dabrowski viewed giftedness not only something children discover about themselves once they enter into school, but as something that develops throughout an individual’s lifetime.

There are two foundational concepts of the theory of positive disintegration. The first is the concept of developmental potential. This refers to the amount and types of giftedness individuals possess: “The stronger the endowment, the greater the potential for advanced development. How it will be fulfilled depends on the life conditions that either assist or block personal growth” (Daniels & Piechowski, 2009, p. 7). It is important to address that *potential* only means what is possible, not a prediction of what will be. Dabrowski (1964) believed that as a person “loses the cohesion which is necessary for feeling a sense of meaning and purpose in life, he is motivated to develop himself” (p. 3). Through this dismantling, a gifted individual often finds new ways to develop their personal growth. Only with intentional mentoring, nurturing, and participating in certain opportunities will this development be possible for gifted individuals.

The second concept is *multilevelness*, which means “human experience varies according to level or type of development. Human emotions, motivations, values, desires, and behaviors are expressed in strikingly different ways” (Daniels & Piechowski, 2009, p. 7). For Dabrowski, a gifted individual’s emotional growth was important to know in order to identify their developmental stage. A person could feel joy because they beat an opponent (low level) or they could experience joy when they make a self-discovery or feel inspired (high level) (Dabrowski, 1964; Daniels & Piechowski, 2009).

To expand on multilevelness, Dabrowski introduced “overexcitabilities” that gifted individuals can experience. The term *overexcitability* comes from a Polish word that translated means “superstimulatability” (Dabrowski, 1964; Daniels & Piechowski, 2009). When others describe someone as “spirited,” this often means the individual has an overexcitability. To further define this concept,

Overexcitability means that life is experienced in a manner that is deeper, more vivid, and more acutely sensed. This does not just mean that one experiences more curiosity, sensory enjoyment, imagination, and emotion, but also that the experience is of a different kind, having a more complex and more richly textured quality. (Daniels & Piechowski, 2009, p. 9)

To the outside eye, people often see a person who has one or a few overexcitabilities as a person who lives intensely. Daniels and Piechowski (2009) present the analogy of a cable television connection with many information feeds instead of a rabbit ear antenna with only local stations. Gifted individuals have many modes of experiencing and channeling information and life.

Dabrowski theorized five overexcitabilities, also abbreviated as OE: psychomotor, sensual, intellectual, imaginal, and emotional. The following list illustrates some of the key traits of the overexcitabilities:

- 1) Psychomotor: Surplus of energy when it comes to movement, speech, activeness, drivenness. These individuals enjoy intense physical activity and competition. They can have trouble with nervous habits, excessive talking, working too much, and impulsiveness.
- 2) Sensual: Enhanced aliveness, sensory (seeing, smelling, tasting, touching, hearing), and aesthetic (delight in beautiful objects, sounds, words, music, form, color, etc.) pleasure. These individuals sometimes engage in overeating, hypersexuality, and wanting to be the center of attention.

- 3) Intellectual: Desired knowledge, discovery, and truth. Gifted individuals who are intellectual are curious, have high concentration levels, love to read, and possess detailed observation skills. They ask many questions and enjoy problem solving. These people are very reflective and independent in thought.
- 4) Imaginational: Vivid imaginations and thrive when able to dream, fantasize, and invent. These individuals enjoy image, metaphor, and visualization. They sometimes mix truth and fiction and have a low tolerance for boredom. They need a lot of variety in their lives.
- 5) Emotional: Intense emotions and feelings. These individuals have extreme and complex emotions when it comes to themselves or taking on others' emotions. Gifted individuals with this overexcitability may have very physical effects with their emotions, such as stomach issues, pounding heart, blushing, and sweaty palms. These physical symptoms are also indicative of inhibition, euphoria, anxiety, depression, and suicidal moods. They have a strong capacity for deep relationships. (Dabrowski, 1964; Daniels & Piechowski, 2009)

After seeing what behaviors describe each overexcitability category, it becomes clear that these gifted individuals can have many positive and negative experiences according to the particular behaviors of each category. These individuals can have one overexcitability category or several that overlap at times. It all depends on their lifetime development of these overexcitabilities, whether it be how parents raise their gifted children, the influence and mentorship of their teachers, or the careers they choose. All of these

overexcitabilities can benefit a person's academic, professional, and personal life in positive ways; however, if not consciously developed,

Overexcitability is often viewed by others as overacting or as inappropriate behavior needing to be tempered...aspects of intensity are mistaken for indicators of potential pathology rather than as signs of strong developmental potential.

What looks abnormal, as compared to more typical development, mental health professionals tend to see as something to be treated rather than as a contributor to optimal development. (Daniels & Piechowski, 2009, p. 15)

This is precisely why gifted research is essential beyond the K-12 time period. Gifted children generally turn into gifted adults, but without proper channeling some may not achieve their full potential. Without certain resources and chances for development throughout their lifetime, gifted adults with mental health issues may struggle with social skills, developing healthy platonic and romantic relationships, taking risks, and finding fulfillment in their education and careers (Fiedler, 2015; Jacobson, 1999; National Education Association, 2006). Taking on these struggles can further perpetuate a gifted individual's mental health problems. Depending on race, class, or gender, even distribution of the gifted label does not always occur (Fiedler, 2015; Kerr & McKay, 2014). Additionally, overexcitabilities lead to the mislabeling of mental health issues in gifted individuals. Conversely, overexcitabilities may go unnoticed in introverted or quiet children—more common in gifted girls since society often dictates that well-behaved girls and women should be quiet (Fiedler, 2015, p. 190). Although mislabeling of mental health is true in some cases, gifted individuals can have both overexcitabilities as well as mental health issues. They are not necessarily more susceptible, but mental health

indicators can present themselves in unique ways in gifted individuals. The problem lies in the fact that practitioners sometimes only treat the mental health problems but fail to see that some of the symptoms may also be overexcitabilities contributing to the creative and intellectual growth of the gifted individual. Dabrowski (1964) argued that

the classification and generalization may suffice for the psychiatrist who deals only with patients coming to him in the psychiatric clinic, but they are inadequate to the handling of the problems of prevention, difficulties in child development, problems of education, and minor problems of nervousness and slight neurosis. The “pathological” disorders of impulses, of rationality, and of personality can be, on the one hand, the symptoms of serious illness, noxious for an individual and for society, but on the other hand they may well be—in the author’s opinion—and usually are a movement toward positive development. In fact, these disturbances are necessary for the evolution progress of the individual to a higher level of integration. (p. 10)

This does not mean that gifted individuals with mental health problems should not be treated with medication and other therapies; however if symptoms are only looked at as problems to erase, there is a good chance that these symptoms that are also overexcitabilities will cease to help the gifted individual to develop.

Twice-Exceptionality and Misdiagnosis

According to Dabrowski, gifted people need to experience some psychological symptoms in order to develop through positive disintegration throughout their lifetime (Amend, 2009). Dabrowski (1964) believed that

individuals of advanced personality development whose lives are characterized by rich intellectual and emotional activity and a high level of creativity often show symptoms of positive disintegration. Emotional and psychomotor hyperexcitability and many psychoneuroses are positively correlated with great mental resources, personality development, and creativity.” (p. 14)

For some gifted individuals, without letting themselves have moments of mental health symptoms and breakdowns, their intellectual and creative development can suffer.

Although research has not proven that gifted individuals experience a higher rate of mental health problems, the term generated in order to accurately describe a person with both giftedness and mental health is twice-exceptionality. A term that was developed in the mid-1990s,

2e [twice-exceptional] students are highly knowledgeable and talented in at least one particular domain. However, their giftedness is often overshadowed by their disabilities, or these students may be able to mask or hide their learning deficits by using their talents to compensate. Sometimes a twice-exceptional child’s special education needs are overlooked until adolescence or later, or are never identified through his or her life. (National Association for Gifted Children)

Again, my research focuses on those twice-exceptional individuals who have mental health issues. Some common twice-exceptional mental health pairings are depression/gifted, anxiety/gifted, ADHD/gifted and Asperger’s/gifted (Amend, 2009; Martin, Burns, Schonlau, 2010; Sunde Peterson, 2009; Rinn & Bishop, 2015).

Healthcare professionals, counselors, and psychologists often miss a twice-exceptional diagnosis because of their limited training on giftedness (Rinn & Plucker,

2004). The DSM-V-TR does not include giftedness as a category, causing healthcare professionals to overlook gifted behaviors when it comes to a client's psychological health. Educators and clinicians often see gifted individuals' overexcitabilities and eccentricities as mental health diagnostic evidence (Jackson & Frankfourth Moyle, 2009). Hence, learning disabilities or mental health diagnoses are often the only aspects that receive attention and giftedness goes unnoticed (Kerr & McKay, 2014; National Association for Gifted Children; Webb et al., 2015). By prescribing medication and therapy to a gifted individual without considering their giftedness, the healthcare professionals may be interfering with the positive disintegration process. Because of this, "...an inaccurate diagnosis may lead to a view of the behaviors as something to eliminate rather than something to embrace and help one grow" (Amend, 2009, p. 87). Some of these gifted individuals with mental health issues, in other words, fear their gifts will be muted as an effect of medication. Forney (2012) describes her own fear as a gifted artist being put on bipolar medication as "Art was my blood, my heart, my life. I'd always been terrified at the thought of going blind, but what if I couldn't even think creatively?" (p. 24). She worried that her overexcitability development would cease to exist. Dabrowski (1964) believed that when a gifted individual experienced anxiety, depression, or other symptoms of mental health, sometimes this merely means the individual is experiencing overexcitability development. The word disintegration in Dabrowski's theory sounds like a negative experience, but it does not have to be. The thought behind this term is that sometimes the individual needs to disintegrate in order to integrate and/or grow within their giftedness. Amend (2009) quotes Mika (2008) to further explain the concern over misdiagnosis of gifted behavior: "By pathologizing disintegrative experiences associated

with creativity and self-transformation, we stigmatize individuals undergoing accelerated growth and add to their burdens rather than help relieve them” (p. 95).

Again, there has been research done on how overexcitabilities and twice-exceptionality affect children in the K-12 classroom, but few studies focus on how gifted college students cope with these characteristics throughout their time in higher education. The following section will discuss some of the research done on the patterns and complications of twice-exceptional college students.

Twice-Exceptional College Students

The enormous pressures of college academics, independence, and social life for a gifted student can lead to certain mental health issues if not monitored and managed well. The late Dr. James T. Webb is still considered one of the most influential gifted education psychologists and researchers nationally and internationally. He was the founder of the Supporting Emotional Needs of Gifted Children (SENG), on the National Association for Gifted Children’s Board of Directors, and an American Psychological Association Fellow (The Global Center for Gifted and Talented Children). His highly referenced book *Misdiagnosis and Dual Diagnoses of Gifted Children and Adults* (Webb et al., 2005) is still considered the leading text on mental health and giftedness. The text gives a thorough overview of what giftedness looks like in both children and adults, what the main characteristics of major mental health disorders look like (attention-deficit/hyperactivity, anger, ideational and anxiety, mood disorders, learning disabilities, sleep disorders, relationship issues, and pathological behaviors), as well as how these disorders either are misdiagnosed or dual diagnosed in gifted people. For my research

purposes, I focus on anger, anxiety, and mood disorders since these are more prevalent in the traditional college age group.

Anger Disorders and Giftedness

Despite the fact that the title of their book includes gifted adults, Webb et al. (2005) primarily focus on gifted children. Still, this book provides a good base of knowledge about what college students may experience before starting their higher education and as they transition to college. One of Dabrowski's (1964) overexcitabilities in gifted individuals is a heightened emotional sensitivity. Webb et al. (2005) write,

The sensitivity of gifted children, when combined with their intensity, leads to strong feelings of hurt, frustration, and anger. Anger is usually expressing unexpressed pain, and open anger is more acceptable to express, particularly for boys, than pain, which can lead to potential ridicule, being labeled a sissy, or being rejected by friends. (p. 61)

Since many public schools try to teach to a one-size-fits-all classroom model, some of these gifted children may be frustrated and angry about the lack of academic challenge and coercion to conform. Much of this anger can derive from power struggles between the gifted child and their parents, teachers, and peers (Webb et al., 2005). In terms of gifted college students, this history of anger and frustration from social and emotional experiences can follow them through their higher education experience. Although these gifted individuals may find more people like them in college, some still have moments of feeling misunderstood (Fiedler, 2015; Kem & Navan, 2006).

Another source of anger for gifted children and adults is frequent bullying. Often depictions of smart children in the media and pop culture paint them as “weird” or

“other” which can lead to others being unkind to them. Because “...our society seems to value anti-intellectualism rather than excellence in the arts or pursuit of learning,” it is no wonder these gifted individuals feel like outcasts (Webb et al., 2005, p.63-64). When twice-exceptional individuals spend most of their young lives trying to conform to social norms, this can take a toll on their emotional and mental energy. Burn out from being different from “normal” individuals can result in “deviance fatigue” (Webb et al., 2005, p. 64). Although in the college setting there is more hope for gifted students to find others like them because of their particular academic majors, extracurricular groups, and honors programs, this anti-intellectualism bullying still exists on campuses. Unfortunately, this can strengthen depression and anger issues.

The most common diagnosed anger disorder in gifted children is oppositional defiant disorder (Webb et al., 2005, p.66). Not all individuals who have this disorder are gifted and not all gifted people have this disorder. Those who have severe power struggles with others every day may have this disorder. They lose their temper easily, argue with those in authority, and are quick to blame others (Webb et al., 2005, p.67)—though it is imperative to realize that gifted individuals tend to blame themselves more often than blaming others (Webb et al., 2005, p.67). When gifted individuals do argue with others, most of the time the basis of their arguments are moralistic beliefs. When it comes to gifted college students with oppositional defiant disorder, this can cause some harsh power struggles between themselves and the faculty teaching their courses or the professional staff running the university. Accepting their grades, complying to the directions of a particular project, or following disciplinary rules instituted by their residence hall government can be areas of intense struggle.

Another anger disorder that has similar behaviors as oppositional defiant disorder is conduct disorder. The biggest difference between these two disorders is that those with conduct disorder have “an additional overlay of cruelty toward other children and animals” (Webb et al., 2005, p. 71). The first signs of this disorder are usually displayed before the age of 10 years old and more often in boys. If not caught early and dealt with appropriately, these individuals tend to engage in more “adult” crimes such as stealing, aggression towards others, violence towards people and/or animals, destroying property, and sexual exploitation (Webb et al., 2005, p. 71-72). Conduct disorder can manifest in different ways with gifted individuals. Instead of vandalizing someone else’s property, sometimes they will destroy their own objects. If they steal, they do not always steal big ticket items. Because of their conduct disorder, they are good at manipulating people around them and will sometimes manipulate “others in the course of school ‘group’ projects to get a better outcome for the group” (Webb et al., 2005, p. 73). They might be a target for bullying, but they will not physically or verbally fight unless provoked by others. Because of this distinction, sometimes gifted individuals with signs of this disorder will be labeled as having “pseudo-conduct disorder.” The main distinction between conduct disorder and pseudo-conduct disorder is that a person with pseudo-conduct disorder is behaving inappropriately as a form of self-preservation from being “different” from others. Additionally, gifted individuals with signs of this disorder are often more emotionally perceptive than those who are not gifted with this disorder (Webb et al., 2005, p. 74). Again, this is a disorder that is typically diagnosed at age 10 or earlier; so once these twice-exceptional students attend college, they may have been

practicing coping mechanisms and receiving treatments years before they arrive on campus.

One last anger disorder that emerges more often during gifted adulthood is narcissistic personality disorder. These individuals “have a dismissive and haughty attitude about them that appears chronically angry, and they do get quite angry if they are challenged” (Webb et al., 2005, p. 76). An important distinction to make is that arrogance does not necessarily equate a person having narcissistic personality disorder. Arrogance is much less impairing than the actual disorder. Some of the prominent behaviors of the disorder are an exaggerated sense of importance, obsessed with fantasies of success, desires a lot of external admiration, has an unreasonable sense of entitlement, is exploitive of others, and unable to empathize with others (Webb et al, 2005, p. 77-78). Although it is entirely possible for a gifted individual to be narcissistic in the clinical sense, there are gifted people who have a healthy level of narcissism to achieve their goals. In a sense,

to develop one’s abilities such that they can make a difference in the world takes a substantial amount of time and effort, and one must focus on developing those abilities. If one is to fashion a major project with a broad vision, it often requires an intense belief in oneself and a focus that also implies neglect of other duties or even other people. (Webb et al., 2005, p. 78-79)

Therefore, clinical practitioners need to take special care when possibly diagnosing a gifted individual with narcissistic personality disorder. For some gifted college students, a healthy dose of narcissism is fuel to achieve their future goals.

Anxiety and Giftedness

Although all people experience some level of anxiousness and worry in their lives, sometimes these behaviors are indicative of anxiety disorders. In my own research, some of my participants identified with probably having anxiety or receiving a medical diagnosis of generalized anxiety disorder (GAD). Typically, this means the individual experiences anxiety/worry about things that may go wrong or are going wrong, along with various physical symptoms that occur almost every day for six months or longer (Mental Health First Aid USA, 2015). Some anxiety disorders are more commonly seen in gifted individuals, particularly obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) and avoidant personality disorder (Webb et al. 2005).

Although obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) is linked to gifted individuals, it is a common misdiagnosis in gifted children and adults. However, if a person is diagnosed with OCD, the median age of onset is 19 years old (Mental Health First Aid USA, 2015). In terms of twice-exceptional individuals, Webb et al. (2005) writes,

We do recognize that there is an overlap between Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder and intelligence. Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder is not often observed in individuals with impaired intelligence, and the very nature of the disorder arises from the thinking that is a key part of high intelligence. (p. 87)

However, the misdiagnosis of OCD in gifted individuals stems from their tendency to be perfectionists. People with OCD are perfectionists, however there is a difference between healthy and unhealthy perfectionism (Rice, Leever, Christopher, & Porter, 2006).

Perfectionism is not a recognized mental health diagnosis; however, if it escalates to the point of being unhealthy, it can be symptomatic of more serious conditions like

anxiety disorders, depression, eating disorders, and even suicide (Adelson & Wilson, 2009). Also, a common myth is that only gifted individuals are perfectionists—they are not the only ones, but researchers see a lot of unhealthy perfectionism in gifted individuals who are academically high achievers (Adelson & Wilson, 2009; Greenspon, 2008; Parker, 2000; Parker & Mills, 1996). Some signs of unhealthy perfectionism are:

- Unrealistic standards
- Often unsatisfied with high levels of effort
- Unable to relax standards
- Motivation based on external evaluations of product
- Performance-oriented
- Low self-esteem
- Fear of failure
- Procrastination
- Workaholic tendencies
- Focus on mistakes
- Greater levels of anxiety. (Adelson & Wilson, 2009, p. 9 & 17)

The root of all these perfectionistic behaviors is the feeling of having control of outcomes and environments. In this regard, it is easy to see why people with unhealthy levels of perfectionism are sometimes diagnosed with OCD.

Gifted people and people with OCD will try to control their anxieties “...through intellectualizing and thinking of ways to relieve tension and exert control over their environments” (Webb et al., 2005, p. 91). The difference between OCD and gifted behaviors is that OCD behaviors cause the person to be unable to function and a gifted

person with similar behaviors may still continue to thrive. But for those gifted college students with OCD, they may find it difficult to sit in chairs and use desks that many other college students have used during the previous lectures. Another example would be that they might experience great anxiety if a professor changes the syllabus in the middle of the semester. Again, Webb et al. (2005) suggest that care providers first work with an individual's giftedness before diagnosing them with OCD.

Another anxiety disorder that can manifest in gifted people is avoidant personality disorder. These people avoid situations where they may receive rejection or criticism. Usually they are quiet, shy, and often introverts. Since highly gifted people can be perfectionists and are often introverts, this disorder can appear (Webb et al., 2005).

Gifted individuals, who have been in a K-12 school system that does not value intellectualism and puts more of an emphasis on social order and standards, often become avoidant college students. Those with the overexcitability of emotional sensitivity

...are reluctant to take risks, particularly if they think they might be evaluated publicly. A gifted person who is also a perfectionist may avoid taking risks for fear of not getting things "completely perfect," believing that anything short of perfection is a failure. (Webb et al., 2009, p. 114).

Twice-exceptional college students with this disorder may avoid taking classes that might ruin their grade point average even though it may interest them. Another example would be a gifted student avoiding social activities in order to get in more study time before an exam—even when unnecessary. This avoidant behavior can cause anxiety and stress as well as possibly hinder a twice-exceptional person's full potential.

As gifted people get older, they meet more people like them and as a result, instead of challenging themselves with these other gifted people, they avoid the challenge because they fear failure—such as in the college setting. The main difference between those who have avoidant personality disorder and those who are gifted perfectionists is that the basis for avoidant personality is fear of external criticism and the source for gifted perfectionism is their internal criticism of not being able to meet their own standards of achievement (Rice, Leever, Christopher, & Porter, 2006; Speirs Neumeister, 2004).

Mood Disorders and Giftedness

The misdiagnosis of certain mood disorders, such as bipolar disorder and depression, happen less with gifted children and adults (Webb et al., 2005, p. 125-126). Bipolar disorder and depression are the most common mood disorders in highly creative gifted people and, consequently, suicide ideation is high with this demographic as well. A 1998 study about high achieving high school students and suicide found “...that 24% of them had considered suicide, 4% of them had actually attempted suicide, and fully 46% knew someone their age who had attempted or committed suicide” (Webb et al., 2005, p. 130). Although the link between these disorders and giftedness tend to be higher, educators and healthcare professionals often forget to nurture the gifted abilities and focus only on the disorder. When healthcare professionals see both of these elements as interacting, better treatment can be administered (Webb et al., 2005).

Young children can have bipolar disorder; however, it is more common to detect its symptoms in adults over the age of 20—typically when gifted young adults are in

college or starting their first careers. Both bipolar disorder I and II have extreme mood swings—mania and depression (Mental Health First Aid USA, 2015). Individuals with bipolar disorder I experience “...at least one manic episode (defined as a minimum of four consecutive days of manic symptoms), though there may—or may not—also be subsequent episodes of depression” (Webb et al., 2005, p. 120). Bipolar disorder II causes the individual to have “...at least one major depressive episode and at least one 24-hour period of hypomanic thoughts and behaviors” (Webb et al., 2005, p. 120). Because gifted people often have extreme emotions due to their overexcitabilities, this can be mistaken for signs of bipolar disorders. Instead of being descriptive of their overall mood, gifted people may have an extreme response to certain situational events or ideas with specific types of triggers. Their emotions can change quickly due to different environmental contexts. However, this does not mean they have bipolar disorder. As seen from previous analysis of mental health from Webb et al. (2005), they suggest working with the gifted nature of the individual before diagnosing them with a mood disorder.

While depression is the most common mood disorder for the entire population, there is not a secure empirical link that demonstrates that gifted people are more likely to suffer from depression than others (Mental Health First Aid USA, 2015). Some studies have suggested that the gifted are more stable when it comes to mood disorders like depression; however, Webb et al. (2005) suggest, “...intellectual strengths do not protect them and, in fact, may put them at increased risk” (p. 126). When gifted children and adults do not feel challenged in their academic and career environments, this often leads to “learned helplessness,” boredom, and depression.

Educators, parents, and employers may not understand why these gifted children and adults are “at risk”—the general thought being “If they are achieving, why is their mood so low?” It is imperative to realize that gifted people who are not being challenged and who may feel isolated from peers need differentiated tasks and activities in order for them not to feel useless or alone (Webb et al., 2005, p. 127). Gifted college students with depression might struggle to identify with a peer group or even feel challenged vigorously enough in their academic field. When depression occurs in gifted children and adults, it is more about the environment that may be causing these feelings than any other factors. Hence, it is vital to look at the interaction between the environment and giftedness before diagnosing a mental health disorder. Because depression is so common in our current culture, sometimes medication treatment is the only treatment some of these gifted individuals receive—which can actually have a dimming effect on some of their gifted abilities.

Lastly, this section briefly discusses a type of depression that is unrecognized in the DSM-V-TR—existential depression. Although there is not a secure connection between regular depression and giftedness, existential depression does appear more often in gifted individuals. This type of depression

...arises from the ability to contemplate issues about existence and the asynchrony that is inherent in giftedness. Gifted children develop the capacity for metacognition—thinking about thinking—early, in some cases even before they develop the emotional and experiential tools to deal with it successfully. They are able to see issues on a global scale, along with implications. Combined with their metacognition are their idealism, their intensity, and their sensitivity, which often

result in feelings of alienation from the world around them. (Webb et al., 2005, p. 134)

Being consumed by thinking can be very overwhelming, especially when surrounded by others who do not think in this way. Existential depression comes to the surface in gifted college students when they realize there are too many moralistic problems to solve in the world and their multipotentiality makes it difficult for them to choose what to tackle. If gifted young adults were not invisible during their childhoods, they commonly hear people telling them they can do anything they want with their lives. Rinn and Plucker (2004) write, “Many gifted students probably do have the ability to succeed in multiple, diverse fields, but this realization may prevent these students from developing advanced skills in any one discipline” (p. 57). Once they arrive at college or graduate school, these gifted college students often need assistance on how to prioritize and make educational choices (Fielder, 2015; Hébert & McBee, 2007, Kem & Navan, 2006).

Consequently, if uncounseled or untreated, these college students are sometimes at risk for suicide because of their intense feelings of isolation (Hébert & McBee; 2007; Webb et al., 2005). Unfortunately, existential depression is not something a person grows out of but instead deals with bouts of these feelings throughout their lives. These individuals need someone to understand their thoughts, reassurance that other people also share their beliefs, and that a person can have an impact on a cause if they collaborate with others with the same passions (Webb et al., 2005).

Of course, this is not an exhaustive list of twice-exceptional categories in college students, but they are the more common ones with this age group. Overall, Webb et al. (2005) argues that both giftedness and mental health deserve attention in twice-

exceptional individuals. Only treating the mental health issue will more than likely decrease the development of the individual's giftedness. There are not many concrete action points for healthcare professionals and educators except for getting more training. Consequently, there needs to be more research done on how to better serve these twice-exceptional individuals in their schools and careers.

Twice-Exceptionalism and Gender Intersectionality

The Early Years

There are certain characteristics and experiences other scholars have written about gifted males and females. It is true that gifted children, regardless of gender, experience some of the same challenges and triumphs during their schooling, however there are some specific trends that are unique to gifted boys and girls.

Early on, gifted girls are voracious readers which often makes them score high on reading comprehension and vocabulary (Halsted, 2009; Kerr, Vuyk, & Rea 2012; Kerr & Multon, 2015). Although many educators and scholars view early reading as a legitimate trait of giftedness, "Too often, gifted girls' precocious reading is discounted as merely memorizing or decoding without comprehension by educators who believe that this is not a signal that a girl is ready for kindergarten" (Kerr, Vuyk, & Rea, 2012, p. 648). I would agree that with any situation there are exceptions; however, this is a prime example of how educators may be shaping their attitudes towards a gender because of culturally engrained stereotypes. It would be interesting to see if boys who are early readers are put underneath the same skeptical lens by teachers and administrators.

As gifted girls move into middle school and high school, there are some who may put their schoolwork aside because they do not feel challenged and decide to pursue other

creative projects. Another trend is that gifted girls can be quiet and compliant in order to not make any waves in the classroom. This unfortunate trait sometimes causes these gifted girls to be passed by when it comes to applying for accelerated after school programs and talent searches. Research has shown that not as many girls apply for these special programs compared to boys (Kerr, Vuyk, & Rea, 2012). This is likely to do with the fact that “adolescent gifted girls are more likely to desire social acceptance over intellectual development. During adolescence, girls face an increasing conflict between displaying competence and losing approval from peers” (Nelson & Smith, 2001, p. 20). A mechanism used by gifted girls to gain social acceptance is befriending older students who may be more intellectually at their level. This can be challenging when most K-12 schools separate classes by age/academic year in school, in turn making it difficult for these gifted females to find a cohort they comfortably identify with (Kerr & Multon, 2015).

In the gifted male student experience, boys may find it difficult to locate their peer group when it is common for parents and teachers to choose “red-shirting” when a boy is kindergarten age. When it comes to gifted boys research, the concept of “red-shirting” is a common theme. Kerr, Vuyk, and Rea (2012) writes,

Kindergarten red-shirting is the practice of holding children back a year from kindergarten entry; the majority of children held back are boys.

There are several reasons that parents might choose to red-shirt their child, including increasing the chances that a boy will be a leader and an athlete.

Red-shirting is not likely to lead to a positive effect and, in some cases, may lead to problems once the gifted boy is enrolled in school. (p.650)

Another reason boys are red-shirted is the impression that they may not be ready for school in connection with their academic performance—including reading performance. Consequently, gifted boys who are red-shirted are often bored in their classrooms because they are not with students their own age (they have a difficult time relating to their younger peers) and need more of an academic challenge. Not only are some of these boys “othered” by their peers because of their intellectual gifts, but they can also feel isolated by not being with their own age group.

Gifted boys, in general, tend to underachieve during their K-12 experience. Many educators choose to ignore the underachievement problem with gifted boys and lean upon the “boys will be boys” mentality (Kerr, Vuyk, & Rea, 2012). Underachievement can be due to being under-challenged in the classroom but there is “The possibility that the gifted boy may be using underachievement as a way of proving his masculinity and independence should not be overlooked” (Kerr, Vuyk, & Rea, 2012, p. 651). In my findings chapter, my participant Luke speaks his experience achieving high grades and not being interested in stereotypical “boy” things in high school and how this affected him.

When transitioning into middle school and high school, gifted boys are often bullied because of these culturally engrained masculinity stereotypes. Gifted boys have the tendency to be bullied because of their intelligence, social awkwardness, and supposed physical weakness (Kerr, Vuyk, & Rea, 2012). Differing from gifted girls who often choose to be quiet in order to hide their intelligence, gifted boys sometimes will act out in class order to be humorous and perceived as “cool” to their classmates. Another way to prevent bullying during their secondary education is to give into the pressure to

participate in school sports (Kerr, Vuyk, & Rea, 2012). If gifted boys are able to get on an athletic team, they often have more of a chance to be accepted by their peers. The expectation of sports participation is much higher for boys than girls (Kerr, Vuyk, & Rea, 2012).

Lastly, the experience of success and failure in academics is very different between gifted girls and boys. When gifted girls fail a test or subject, they often worry about disappointing the people around them—parents and teachers. The thought of disappointing these adult role models sometimes leads to gifted girls having low self-worth (Dinan, 2016; Pomerantz et al., 2002). On the other hand, gifted boys tend to see their academic failures only connected to specific subject areas and do not necessarily feel concern about how it would affect the adult role models around them. Pomerantz et al. (2002) adds on to this argument by writing,

because girls view evaluative feedback as diagnostic of their abilities, failure may lead them to incorporate this information into their more general view of themselves. Boys, in contrast, may be relatively protected from such generalization because they see such feedback as limited in its diagnosticity. (402)

The issue of being successful or not in academics as tied to self-worth to gifted women is evident in many of the female participants I interviewed. In contrast, the twice-exceptional men I interviewed tied their self-worth to a much lesser extent to their academic successes.

This is not an exhaustive list of characteristics and/or behaviors with gifted boys and girls. However, these behaviors highlight many of the experiences my participants

discussed as to being true of their gendered experience of education or observations of others' gendered experiences of education. Although, there is not much written about the behaviors of gifted students when they leave their K-12 education, giftedness and gender challenges do not necessarily become eliminated once a student starts their higher education path.

Twice-Exceptional Women and Imposter Syndrome

Just as there is limited research on twice-exceptional college students in general, there are very few studies on twice-exceptional college women. In order to understand this demographic, it is critical to give an overview of some of the daily challenges of gifted women, whether they live with mental health issues or not. The psychologist Barbara Kerr once described gifted women as "...a person with a fine intellect and extraordinary talents, who also happens to have the cultural 'disability' of being female" (Streznewski, 1999, p. 214). This is a harsh way to describe gifted women, however it is the experience for many gifted women throughout their lifetime. It usually begins in K-12 when gifted girls begin to realize their unique abilities compared to their peers, often resulting in them hiding their gifts in order to conform and gain acceptance by others. These gifted girls need sophisticated counseling and gifted programming in their schools in order for their gifts to thrive. Unfortunately, many schools do not offer such opportunities for their students. If gifted girls and women diminish or hide their talents from their peers and teachers, this can lead to deteriorating mental health (Streznewski, 1999, p. 216).

Kerr and McKay (2014) provide an intricate look into what it means to be a gifted girl and woman in their book *Smart Girls in the 21st Century*. As mentioned before,

healthcare providers misdiagnosing gifted individuals with learning disabilities or mental health is a common mistake because they share many characteristics with each other.

Kerr and McKay (2014) write, “Too many smart girls whose behaviors simply deviate from other girls because of their intellectual interests, creativity, and independence are labeled with a disability. Context is critical” (p. 226). Educators and healthcare providers sometimes falsely evaluate gifted girls and women who transgress the prescriptive social gender roles for femininity as something that strays from healthy mental patterns.

Historically, “scholars who study women have always been engaged in ‘deficit’ thinking—that is, the idea that women are lacking in something, have problems, and are deficient in key abilities and resources compared to men” (p. 176). Although gifted girls and women may possess behaviors that indicate mental health issues, it is important to check historical bias against female behaviors before diagnosing them.

Gifted girls and women tend to mask their disabilities and mental health due to their socialization to not make scenes or inconvenience others (Kerr & McKay, 2014). These girls often receive good grades and perform well in activities despite the fact they may be masking their depression and anxiety from others. Their anxiety and depression “...is often accompanied by dysfunctional perfectionism, eating disorders, and social isolation” (Kerr & McKay, 2014, p. 232). A little anxiety and healthy perfectionism are normal for high achieving girls and women, but a fine line separates productive feelings of stress from deteriorating feelings of anxiety and perfectionism (Rice, Leever, Christopher, & Porter, 2006; Speirs Neumeister; 2004).

Gifted college women statistically have higher grades and higher tests scores on verbal reasoning, writing, and other subjects than gifted men. And today, gifted women

are about even with men in the STEM subjects (Kerr & McKay, 2014). Despite their high scores and achievements, "...many gifted college women have lower self-efficacy than their male peers of the same ability level" (Kerr & McKay, 2014, p. 176). Due to this lower self-efficacy, some women view their giftedness fading as they enter adulthood, while gifted men often view themselves as still having gifted abilities. This is a very important implication for gifted college women. These women may lack confidence in their gifted abilities even when succeeding in their college academics, which can lead to deteriorating mental health such as anxiety and depression.

Another issue gifted college women face is finding a life partner. In the 21st century, marriage age rates in America are older than they used to be for women. However, some gifted college women remain more preoccupied with finding a mate during their time at school than gifted men do. To put it another way,

the conflicts about women's roles that are so prevalent in society today are apparent in the lives of college women: high abilities vs. low confidence; high aspirations vs. romantic distractions, and strong leadership in college activities vs. a passive role in a relationship. (Kerr & McKay, 2014, p. 177)

There is no doubting there have been many opportunities opened to women over the years, yet many of these gifted women are still struggling with being highly intelligent leaders as well as fulfilling the traditional female roles society tells them they need to play.

This chronic self-doubt and confusion about the role they play in society can cause some gifted women to experience imposter syndrome (also called imposter phenomenon). Young (2011) repeatedly references Clance and Imes (1978) as the

original theorists of the imposter phenomenon in gifted women. According to these psychologists, “The term imposter phenomenon is used to designate an internal experience of intellectual phonies” (Clance & Imes, 1978, p. 1). The psychologists observed their gifted female college students and they came to the conclusion that although these women worked hard and excelled academically, they still felt their success was undeserved. From this study and others that followed, the definition of imposter syndrome is:

...people who have a persistent belief in their lack of intelligence, skills, or competence. They are convinced that other people’s praise and recognition of their accomplishments is undeserved, chalking up their achievements to chance, charm, connections, and other external factors. Unable to internalize or feel deserving of their success, they continually doubt their ability to repeat past successes. When they do succeed they feel relief rather than joy. (Young, 2011, p. 16-17)

Individuals do not experience these feelings every day. More often than not, these imposter feelings happen during times of transition (beginning college, graduate school, and new career) (Mendaglio, 2013). Also, a common misperception is that a person with imposter syndrome has bad self-esteem. These individuals still have large goals and are capable of reaching them, whereas most people with low self-image and self-confidence sabotage their goals.

Furthermore, Clance and Imes (1978) asserted the imposter phenomenon is not a recognized mental health issue. However, these feelings of being an imposter can be the root of an individual’s anxiety, depression, and lack of motivation. A few types of

behavior indicate a gifted college woman maybe suffering from imposter feelings. The first involves a person who works overly hard on their academics so they can cover up their “inability.” Another sign of imposter behavior is the woman being intellectually inauthentic with those around them. The direction of this behavior is generally at those in authority, such as professors or advisors. Instead of volunteering what they really think about an idea or activity, they produce what they think their professor wants. These gifted college women believe that if they put forth their own authentic ideas, peers and professors will judge them to be unintelligent or oppositional. Similarly, some use their charm instead of their intellect to gain approval from professors or other superiors. Imposters generally pick a superior, such as a professor, who they respect and try to impress them with their personality instead of their skill. Lastly, gifted women may downplay their talents and intellectual abilities because of the greater societal context. Many gifted women have received messaging from the beginning that being overly successful is a masculine trait, not a feminine one. Because of this, these women will try to mask their abilities in order to follow social norms for women. But unfortunately, “the girl who maintains qualities of independence and active striving (achievement-orientation) necessary for intellectual mastery defines the convention of sex-appropriate behavior and must pay a price, a price in anxiety” (Clance & Imes, 1978, p. 5). Such imposter behavior can lead to mental health issues and potential self-sabotage in gifted college women.

The Secret Thoughts of Successful Women (Young, 2011) discusses gifted women’s experiences with impostor syndrome and techniques on how to cope with such feelings and behavior. Gifted men also experience imposter syndrome, but studies have

shown that women outscore men when it comes to having imposter behaviors (Young, 2011, p. 8). Additionally, imposter syndrome holds women back more than men when it comes to their academics and careers. Societal messages about being successful as being wrong and too masculine have tainted the behaviors of gifted women for many years. As the congresswoman Shirley Chisholm sadly stated, “The emotional, sexual, and psychological stereotyping of females begins when the doctor says, ‘It’s a girl’” (Young, 2011, p. 62). Since these prescriptive gender role messages begin on the first day of life, it is understandable why so many gifted girls and women experience feelings of being an imposter.

Four academic pathways gifted college women take during their time in higher education can influence their mental wellness (Kerr & McKay, 2014). One very typical pathway for many college students is the party scene. Various social groups on campuses, such as Greek organizations, generally promote the scene. Gifted women who are upper-class are frequently encouraged by their families (especially those with Greek legacy) to study something that will ensure high grades (business, communications, etc.) as well as participate in the party scene at school (Kerr & McKay, 2014). These upper-class gifted women, even if employment does not directly happen after graduation, will be fine because of their family’s economic stability. The trouble typically comes for gifted college women who are from middle- to lower-class families who participate in the party scene. They have little support to fall back on. As a result, many of these gifted college women suffer from deteriorating self-esteem, anxiety, and depression (Kerr & McKay, 2014).

Another pathway for gifted college women is the “striver.” These students are usually first-generation college students who are from low income, rural, or racial minority families. These gifted women tend to get a degree they will know they can support themselves with, work throughout college to pay their tuition, and achieve high grades. The struggle for these women is lack of time to engage in anything extra—internships, clubs, social events. The cost of social capital that comes with lack of involvement in extracurricular activities isolates these students. Because these women take college very seriously and isolate themselves, they can struggle with anxiety, depression, and extreme perfectionism (Kerr & McKay, 2014).

Gifted women who are on the “engaged” pathway are those who pick classes, majors, and activities that they have a profound curiosity for and want to challenge their intellect. They may pick these areas of study because of a certain social justice issue they are passionate about or a professor they deeply admire. The focus for these gifted women is less on romantic relationships in college because they are enamored with seeking knowledge. “Engaged” gifted women sometimes struggle with overwhelmed feelings about the big questions, moral and philosophical, which can result in existential depression (Hébert & McBee, 2007; Kerr & McKay, 2014).

Lastly, there is the “creative” pathway for gifted college women. These students may not find a certain major that perfectly fits what they want to do after college, so they piece together their own academic course load. They might study abroad, change colleges, and take gap years. Being on the “creative” pathway can be an isolating one since many peers view these students as outsiders or lazy. It is essential that these gifted

women have strong mentors at their institutions to guide them to their desired future destination (Kerr & McKay, 2014).

Kerr and McKay (2014) volunteer a list of advice for gifted college women. Some of these included finding a mentor; raising your hand in class to be an active participant in the discussion; paying attention to how they are managing their emotions such as stress, anxiety, and depression; and seeking a counselor for guidance and support on how to be a successful gifted college woman. These were surprisingly concrete suggestions compared to a lot of twice-exceptional literature. However, these were all elements of self-advocacy. Although self-advocacy is an important skill to learn in college, some of these women are not aware of their twice-exceptionality. Unfortunately, this can lead to a “blaming the victim” mentality instead of placing responsibility on institutions. There is a need for greater intervention on the part of higher educational institutions on the behalf of these twice-exceptional students through better training of educators, counselors, as well as ample programming (Rinn & Plucker, 2004).

Discussion

Through all the texts featured in the literature review, one thing is for certain—there is still research needed on twice-exceptional college students and, more specifically, twice-exceptional college women. Despite the fact that there has not been a study that proves a strong connection between being gifted and struggling with mental health, it is commonly accepted there is some sort of unique interaction between the two (Kerr & McKay, 2014; Sayler et al. 2015; Webb et al., 2005). This is why it is critical to take a person’s gifted nature into account when diagnosing them with a learning or mental health disorder. The problem is the tendency to ignore an individual’s giftedness, not

necessarily in the order of diagnosis or treatment. Due to gifted behaviors such as heightened emotional sensitivity and creativity, some of these can be misdiagnosed as learning and mental health disorders which then can lead to giftedness to be ignored (Kerr & McKay, 2014; Mahoney, 2001; Webb et al., 2005). Many healthcare providers and other professionals are ill prepared to work with this demographic. For example,

...medical school and pediatric residencies address only the neurological and sometimes psychiatric aspects of mental sub-normality; problems experienced by gifted children are not part of the curriculum...Psychology graduate degree programs are similarly lacking, and with a few exceptions, teacher education programs omit this important information as well. (Webb et al., 2005, p. xxxv)

Because educators and healthcare professionals receive little to no training on gifted behaviors and/or twice-exceptionality, this often leads to the focus being only on mental health issues (Webb et al., 2005).

Gifted young adults have developmental challenges throughout their time of transition from high school to college. Many gifted college students struggle with increased perfectionism, anxiety, and depression due to stressful workloads, isolation from peers, and low self-concepts (Hébert & McBee, 2007; Kerr & McKay, 2014; Rice, Leever, Christopher, & Porter, 2007; Salyer et al., 2005; Speirs Neumeister, 2004; Streznewski, 1999). These low self-concepts can develop into imposter syndrome or imposter phenomenon—more commonly in women. Imposter syndrome does not necessarily mean these gifted women do not highly achieve, but it does mean they may mask their abilities in order to fit in with the traditional female stereotypes in our culture (Clance & Imes, 1978; Miller, Falk, & Haung, 2009; Young, 2011).

The void in gifted literature is the lack of a call to action about how to support gifted college students and gifted women with mental health issues. Most of the literature describes the features of the mental health issue and recommends helping these individuals find appropriate healthcare professionals with gifted training (Kerr & McKay, 2014; Rinn & Plucker, 2004; Streznewski, 1999; Webb et al., 2005). Unfortunately, many of these researchers also recognized to find trained professionals in gifted individuals is a difficult task. Other authors encourage independent research by the gifted individual or their guardians in order to share these materials with educators and healthcare professionals—essentially self-advocating (Kerr & McKay, 2014). At the higher education level, another suggestion for colleges and universities is to provide some sort of honors program or special honors classes for gifted college students. These classes tend to be smaller and surround gifted students with others who have similar experiences and abilities (Streznewski, 1999). Although these are positive steps in the nurturing gifted individuals, more research needs to be done on how to do so. Hopefully, these initiatives can begin in the K-12 system so they can have a positive impact on gifted children who eventually grow up to be gifted men and women in college and professional environments. In this dissertation, I seek to address the gaps in the gifted literature by interviewing twice-exceptional students. By understanding their experiences and suggestions, researchers and practitioners might be able to better develop interventions to help these students succeed.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Since my study leaned heavily on qualitative interviewing of twice-exceptional college students, my research design was flexible, meaning that the methodologies I used evolved as I collected my data from participants. When conducting exploratory research on a topic, a flexible design is the most beneficial since some of the researcher's discoveries along the way may require editing the original design (Robson & McCartan, 2016). For my research, the narrative and discourse analysis approaches were useful for my topic since they allowed the interviewee to describe their experiences of twice-exceptionalism as well as produce suggestions for their institution. The following two sections discuss the advantages, disadvantages, and specific ethical considerations when using narrative and discourse analysis in twice-exceptional college student research.

Narrative Analysis

Since many twice-exceptional individuals are very good at concealing their mental health issues because of their intelligence, a narrative analysis approach to interviewing may be the first time where these stories and experiences come to the surface for these individuals. Since narrative analysis is based on telling stories, these accounts "...can refer to an entire life story, long sections of talk leading to extended accounts of lives, or even an answer to a single question" (Robson & McCartan, 2016, p. 165; Roulston, 2010). Narrative analysis also lends itself well to life history research

which is a qualitative approach that encompasses the interviewee's life experiences and meanings (Germeten, 2013). Borrowing from life history in my own study, my interviewees' individual narratives provide a "...work of history as much as they are about individuals, the social spaces they inhabit, and the societies they live in" (Riessman, 2003, p. 333). To clarify even further, narrative analysis can consist of "... 'stories told by research participants,' 'interpretive accounts developed by an investigator,' and 'even the narrative a reader constructs after engaging with the participant's and investigator's narratives'" (Roulston, 2010, p. 163). Since there are no standard rules for narrative methodology, creating a transcript of the interviews and/or conversation and then reducing the data to a level at which readers will clearly understand the information is the methodology's main objective. There are two common approaches for narrative data analysis: "...the approaches can be divided into holistic analysis (i.e. analyzing the narrative as a whole) or sequential analysis (where the text is broken down into segments which are coded and then collapsed into categories which are clustered into themes)" (Robson & McCartan, 2016, p. 374). For my study, I broke up my narrative in segments by pulling quotes and blocked quotes and placing them under categories which were then coded as specific themes. Segmentation of the larger interviews allowed for me to slow down and conduct a deep narrative analysis as well as include some critical discourse analysis of interview transcript.

In order to break the narrative into segments, I re-read the interview transcripts several times—both while listening to the participant's recording as I read along as well as reading silently. Each time I read the transcripts, I would underline intriguing quotes and mark re-occurring themes and patterns within each interview. After I did this with

each interview, I organized all the segmented quotes under categories, such as perfectionism, academic pressure, societal expectations of gifted people. Then, I decided which categories could be coded under the same themes. For example, the categories of perfectionism, academic pressure, and societal expectations of gifted people were placed under the umbrella theme of “pressure to excel.” Ultimately, these became the main themes of my narrative:

- Masking mental health problems
- Pressure to excel
- Social anxiety and isolation
- Social stigma of mental health problems
- How mental health and giftedness interact
- Intersectionality of twice-exceptionality and gender
- University support

Once this process was completed, I then looked at all the passages underneath each category and decided which participants’ passages supported or differed from others’ experiences and arranged the quotes and passages in an order that made rhetorical sense within the theme.

The most challenging part of this process was to make each of these participant voices not only stand out from each other but also develop a dialogue with one another. I did not want the final narrative to read like a laundry list of quotes or isolated experiences. In a sense, I wanted my writing to give time to each participant’s experience but also find some twice-exceptional community dialogue—despite the fact that these individuals were never in the same room. As stated before, the twice-exceptional

experience can be very isolating for these individuals. But through a research narrative, these often siloed individuals can find each other.

It is advantageous to use narrative methodology with the twice-exceptional population since “These kinds of approaches to the analysis of narratives provide information concerning how interviewees position themselves within their stories, as well as how they wish to be heard by their audiences” (Roulston, 2010, p. 164). The interviewee frames their own experiences for the researcher’s audience. For this reason, a narrative methodology can take on a feminist research lens. Although the initial aim of feminist research was to end the marginalization of women in humanities and social science research, it translates well to other “...oppressed groups, whose lives and experiences would otherwise be rendered invisible or only partially rendered...” (Robson & McCartan, 2016, p. 383). For my research with twice-exceptional individuals, narrative methodology with a feminist lens was emancipatory for the interviewees, since they actively took part in the portrayal of their experiences and identities that often go misunderstood by others.

A recent text that does a phenomenal job at mixing narrative analysis within its larger study is *Smart Girls in the 21st Century: Understanding Talented Girls and Women* (Kerr & McKay, 2014). Throughout the book, they include “Smart Girl Profiles” that have vivid narrative descriptions along with direct quotations from interviews. A short example is as follows:

Alyssa loves to learn; she absorbs knowledge rapidly and always desires more information and more experiences. Super-conscientious, she has an amazing work

ethic. Her classmates and teachers can count on her to complete her work and to do her very best work as much as possible...

What's the hardest part about being you? *Being accepted for who I am.*

Staying true to who I am and reminding myself who I am. I have things that I need to work on, but I shouldn't have to do a 180 to fit how others want me to be. (Kerr & McKay, 2014, p. 46)

Within each Smart Girl Profile, there is balance of third person narration and direct quotations from the interview transcript. In this way, a researcher can paraphrase some of their observations and even some details from the transcript, while highlighting the most memorable quotations to fit their overall arguments. Although the Smart Girl Profiles are a small part of Kerr and McKay's (2014) chapters, the interweaving of these interview and narrative segments give the research a more personal touch as well as real world examples that emphasize the study's arguments. Modeling this type of narrative methodology worked well with my twice-exceptional study because "...using narratives gives us the opportunity to 'see more' than only questions and answers" (Germeten, 2013, p. 614). Here is an example interweaving the interview and narrative segments while balancing it with some narrative analysis:

Another participant I spoke with grew up in rural North Dakota and was very familiar with the social codes of his town. Luke struggled with his mental health from a very young age and was eventually diagnosed with double depression. Double depression is a combination of dysthymia (persistent, lingering depression) and major depressive disorder (intensifies for periods of short time). Luke grew up in a family who did not believe in mental health issues. He

describes being twice-exceptional individual in his family and rural community like this:

There's this perception in my family and I think in the community that I was raised in...*that mental health is indicative of the sort of moral failing, you are a bad person because you are depressed, it's a sort of weakness that you need to overcome like everyone else. Everyone else has it so bad; you don't have it any worse than anyone else.*

The representative speech act towards the end of the passage (italicized) is unfortunately very tied into Luke's identity as a person with mental health (Strauss & Feiz, 2014). Not only did he feel isolated from his peers growing up (they knew him as the smart and sad kid), he was isolated in the home he grew up in. His father was suspicious of higher education and none of his siblings graduated from a higher education institution. Luke remembers hiding that he loved music, poetry, and art from his family, because those were not socially acceptable interests for rural boys. Gifted boys and men often fear openly liking things like music, art, literature, and theatre since these are not stereotypical masculine interests (Kerr & Cohn, 2001; Kerr & Multon, 2015). Since Luke was hiding his interests and protecting his sensitive feelings with depression, his siblings viewed him as cold, distant, and narcissistic. Battling with his mental health and isolation only intensified during college.

My goal was to give my participants an active voice within my research as well as an opportunity to frame their own stories through my narrative. I wanted my audience to

have a vivid picture of what the twice-exceptional experience feels and looks like for these college students.

Although narrative analysis gives both the researcher and the interviewee framing power, "...some researchers feel that narrative analysis gives the researcher '...privileged access to personal experience' and '...narratives too often includes inappropriate assumptions about human actors and social action'" (Robson & McCartan, 2016, p. 374). Finding this balance of critical analysis and straightforward narrative is especially important when working with the twice-exceptional population. Because these individuals often feel misunderstood by their families, friends, and others, making wide sweeping assumptions about what they present in their narrative would add to their feelings of marginalization. Moreover, the researcher should avoid making assumptions about the subject's mental health or gifted experiences beyond the stories they share. For example, in my study, I asked for participants who identified with being gifted and having a mental health issue regardless if they were formally diagnosed or not. If any of my participants were not officially diagnosed with a mental health issue but believe they do struggle with one, it is not my job as a researcher to diagnose them. My role is to share and analyze their stories, but if I assume they have a particular diagnosis, this leads to a lack of credibility on my part as well as contributing to further marginalization of the twice-exceptional individual. If the researcher uses these assumptions as rhetorical devices to make connections to their arguments, their credibility diminishes. On the other hand, researchers who use narrative analysis may become "...complicit in the general culture of what they term 'the interview society' and are too ready to celebrate narratives and biographical accounts, rather than subjecting them to systematic analysis" (Robson &

McCartan, 2016, p. 374). Providing no narrative analysis at all would not lend an emancipatory hand to my twice-exceptional interview subjects. Without some analysis of the narrative, the main argument for the entire study can be lost. My research required a balance of critical analysis and interpretation of the narrative for there to be suggestions on how universities can better help these twice-exceptional students succeed.

Discourse Analysis

In addition to narrative analysis of my interviews, discourse analysis of the language the participants used in their answers highlighted various patterns and themes. Discourse theory "...is about seeing interactive communication through the lens of socially meaningful identities. Speakers/writers use language, bodies, and things ('context') to recognize such identities (successfully or not)" (Gee, 2014, p. 25). Discourse theory bases itself on many of the performative qualities of using language. Therefore, discourse analysis is "...the study of language in use" or how language works in a specific speech act (Gee, 2014, p. 8). Since some of my twice-exceptional subjects revealed their stories for the first time in our interviews, it was essential to pay attention to the language they used to position themselves within their experiences. To go a step further, my study utilized *critical* discourse analysis which indicates that the interviewer wants "...to speak to and, perhaps, intervene in, institutional, social, or political issues, problems, and controversies in the world. They want to apply their work to the world in some fashion" (Gee, 2014, p. 9). Since one goal of my dissertation is to suggest some ways universities can better help twice-exceptional students succeed, it was imperative that my discourse analysis included a critical lens to provide a voice for those students who need special services.

To break down critical discourse analysis even further, it is important to discuss the term speech act. The definition of a speech act is:

...the basic units of communication in which utterances or spates or discourse are viewed as social acts that fulfill social functions. Speech acts are produced (and understood) in at least three different ways: as **locutionary act**, expressing propositional content or information just by virtue of saying something; as **illocutionary act**, the interactional function of the utterance itself...and as **perlocutionary act**, when change takes place as a result of a speaker having produced a speech act and a hearer having understood it...(Strauss & Feiz, 2014, p. 230)

To go an extra step deeper, these speech acts divide into categories that are even more specific. John Searle's (1976) "A Classification of Illocutionary Acts" defined "...five basic categories of speech acts for which he provides clear-cut classificatory criteria: Representatives, Directives, Commissives, Expressives, and Declarations" (Strauss & Feiz, 2014, p. 234). Strauss and Feiz provide an accessible outline for these terms and the following is an abridged version of that outline:

- **Representatives** are those speech acts that "commit the speaker to something being the case, to the truth of a proposition."
- **Directives** are speech acts that "involve attempts by a speaker to get a hearer to do something."
- **Commissives** are words or phrases that "commit the speaker to some future course of action."

- **Expressives** allow the speaker to “express the speaker’s psychological or emotional state.”
- **Declarations** “result in the immediate change of circumstance or official state of affairs” in a speech act exchange. (Strauss & Feiz, 2014, p. 235)

During the discourse analysis of my twice-exceptional interviews, I specifically looked for representative and expressive speech acts. In order to foster these types of responses, there was extra care taken when composing interview questions. These questions needed to encourage the twice-exceptional speakers to answer in ways that they felt as if they were representing their authentic selves as well as comfortable expressing their emotions about their mental health and gifted experiences. The following is an example from my narrative demonstrating speech act analysis:

Karrie, a college senior diagnosed with depression and anxiety, chooses to hide her mental health experiences from all family members except her mother:

Well, to be completely honest, my mom is the only one in my immediate family that knows of my mental health...I feel like if I were to say to my family that I have things going on, that would change their perception of me. Whether that’s good or bad, *I don’t want to be given more attention because I have mental health problems, but I also don’t want to be seen as, “Oh, well, it’s just because she has anxiety, that’s why she’s stressed out all the time.” I don’t want them to put their own feelings into who I am.*

By masking her mental health from other family members, Karrie can control others' perceptions of her. She uses a representative speech act (the italicized phrase) in order to firmly situate her identity within her family.

It is advantageous to use discourse analysis when studying twice-exceptional college students, since expectations put on a "good student" may cause trapped feelings. Once educators label a student as "gifted", parents, teachers, and peers begin to expect certain behaviors from that individual. Because of this, gifted individuals are in one discourse, which becomes problematic when that individual also struggles with mental health. Using discourse analysis with twice-exceptional interviews is recognition work. Gee (2014) argues,

People engage in such work when they try to make visible to others (and to themselves, as well) who they are and what they are doing. People engage in such work when they try to recognize others for who they are and what they are doing. People engage in such work within interactions, moment by moment... They engage in such work when they try to understand human interaction as researchers, practitioners, theoreticians, or interventionists of various sorts. (p. 54)

Oftentimes, gifted individuals with mental health issues try to hide their feelings about being out of control in order to fulfill societal expectations of being intelligent. As a researcher, it was vital I ask these students interview questions that gave them a chance to represent themselves emotionally and accurately. Through these exploratory interviews, it is quite possible that these students better understood their own identities through expression. Gee (2014) writes,

To enact identities people have to talk the right talk, walk the right walk, behave as if they believe and value the right things, and wear the right things at the right time and the right place. Identity is performance. Like all performances, it will not work unless at least some people recognize what you are and what you are doing in your performance. (p. 24)

For many of these twice-exceptional students, they have talked the right talk and walked the right walk their entire lives in order to fit in with the greater culture around them.

Through asking questions that recognize their twice-exceptional experience, this can lead to the empowerment of the twice-exceptional individual.

The last major element of discourse analysis I used in my study is stance.

According to Strauss and Feiz (2014), the term stance means

...the speaker's or writer's feeling, attitude, perspective or position as enacted in discourse...Stance emerges in a speaker's or writer's choice of one linguistic form over another, the coloring of utterances with prosodic contours or punctuation, the sequential ordering of utterances; it emerges in gestures, silences, hesitations, hedges, and in overlapping stretches of talk. In all of these instances of discourse (and others), a speaker's or writer's stance is enacted and created; it is negotiated and re-negotiated. (p. 275)

It is also important to note, stance not only relies on linguistic features of a speech act, it can also involve bodily gestures (i.e. facial expressions, hand gestures, etc.). In addition, stance specifies a perspective, a value, or an opinion of a speaker. Because of these non-verbal and less obvious verbal indicatives of stance, it was valuable to video record the

interviews and keep a research journal to jot down notes about their behaviors during and after the interviews.

Stance divides into two more categories: Affective and Epistemic stance.

Emotions and feelings relate to affective stance. Strauss and Feiz (2014) state that affective stance “reflects ‘the mood, attitude, feeling, and disposition, as well as degrees of emotional intensity, vis-à-vis some focus of concern” (p. 276). Epistemic stance, on the other hand, is less emotive and more tied to information sources. It

...reflects the belief system of a speaker or writer vis-à-vis the issues being communicated or discussed, including information sources...degrees of certainty or shades of doubt in the presentation of facts and opinions, and degrees of personal or institutional commitment to the issue(s) at hand. (Strauss & Feiz, 2014, p. 279)

When analyzing my interviews, I paid attention to moments affective and epistemic stance to reveal the ways in which twice-exceptional students cope with their mental health. An example from my narrative using stance is as follows:

Again, Zane is able to speak of very emotional experiences with his struggle with depression by using epistemic stance—he pulls the emotion out of his past and volunteers the facts. Throughout his interview, even when speaking about his moments of suicidal thoughts, Zane’s facial expressions and voice were very even and stoic (Strauss and Feiz, 2014).

When listening, watching, and reading my interviews several times, I wanted their stance to help illustrate how these twice-exceptional individuals process and position themselves within their own mental health experiences. Some of these individuals focused on the

emotional intensity of their experiences, while others focused more on the logical and compartmental side of coping since most are skeptical of letting their emotions get in the way of their achievements (Fiedler, 2015; Webb et al., 2005).

The primary ethical consideration of using a critical discourse analysis methodology is that the analyst is easily manipulated by "...his or her interest of passion for intervening in some problem in the world" (Gee, 2014, p. 9). When speaking with twice-exceptional college students about their mental health experiences, some of the stories that emerged were very sensitive and emotional. As a critical discourse analyst, it was imperative to try to find a balance of being objective and yet emanate a certain element of sincerity and care to the interviewees to establish trust. Additionally, my own experiences of being a twice-exceptional individual had to remain in check while composing my interview questions and analyzing the discourse of the transcripts. Although my twice-exceptional experiences may be similar to my interview subjects, maintaining a neutral stance and letting go of any biases was essential for effective data collection and interpretation. On the other hand, critical discourse analysts "... often think that a purely descriptive approach is an evasion of social and political responsibility" (Gee, 2014, p. 9). By combining both critical discourse and narrative analysis, these two approaches balanced one another. A narrative approach provided a more objective approach when describing exactly the words, characteristics, and actions of the interviewee; while the critical discourse analysis produced a call to action for how to better serve the twice-exceptional college student population.

Methods

Participants

After receiving IRB approval at midsized, midwestern university, I sent an email notification to the honors program students. The email explained the nature of my study on twice-exceptional college students. Although being a student in an honors program does not necessarily mean they all have the gifted label, this population does lend itself to having a greater concentration of high achieving college students. Honors programs/colleges were created by public institutions to provide gifted and talented college students with unique and personalized educational opportunities (Hébert & McBee, 2007; Plominski & Burns, 2018; Rinn, 2006). Because of the nature of honors programs, I hoped to find an array of twice-exceptional experiences.

Definitions of giftedness range from an individual who is in the top ten percent of their age group in intelligence to displaying exceptional abilities in one or more areas (mathematics, science, music, etc.) (Makel, Snyder, Thomas, Malone, & Putallaz, 2015; National Association for Gifted Children; Rinn 2012). Some gifted individuals are labeled through special tests taken as children, while others are identified by teachers who observed their accelerated academic performance. I included these definitions of giftedness on my consent form and emailed students in order to identify potential research participants. Additionally, I provided some examples of mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, bipolar, etc. This helped identify a more homogenous subject population. I did not ask for the students to provide medical proof of a mental health diagnosis, since this is a highly sensitive and private topic. Additionally, students may

believe they struggle with mental health issues but choose not to receive a formal diagnosis from a practitioner.

By giving a clear definition of twice-exceptional individuals in the email, the participants self-identified with the label. There, of course, was a chance for more participants who were undiagnosed to volunteer compared to officially diagnosed individuals. However, there were only a couple of individuals who claimed they were self-diagnosed with a mental health issues. The few who weren't diagnosed had interesting reasons as to why they haven't gone in to see a medical professional—social stigma of being mentally ill in an area of the country that is still believes a person should “pull themselves up by their bootstraps” as well as not wanting to be medicated. I found these undiagnosed twice-exceptional individuals equally as compelling as the diagnosed participants because they illustrated the range of the twice-exceptional experiences. I requested volunteer students to participate in interviews lasting approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour. Additionally, I set up shorter follow-up interview sessions with some of the participants in order to glean more information from each participant after they had time to reflect on our discussion. I emphasized these interviews will remain confidential with the exception of a participant who may be in immediate danger of hurting themselves. Luckily, I did not interview anyone who revealed they were currently engaging in self-harm or thoughts of suicide.

If there were any adverse or emotional reactions during the interview process, I am well acquainted with the campus' counseling services. I planned to refer participants to counseling and other student services. Additionally, I have a certification in Mental Health First Aid which gave me the skills on how to communicate, assess, and refer

students in mental distress to varying services. Students were informed that I am not a counselor, only a referrer, and cannot pay for such services.

Ideally, I wanted to interview 15-20 twice-exceptional college students at the midsized, midwestern university. This number aligns well with quality criteria for qualitative research (Creswell, 1998; Mason, 2010). My final number resulted in 13 participants since I reached a high quality and variance of interview content from each participant. In the student sample, there was a range of college year representation, such as first years through seniors, one nontraditional, and one newly graduated. Out of the 13 participants, three went through official gifted testing during their elementary school years. Ten of the participants were labeled as gifted by their elementary school teachers and were placed either in enriched classes, advanced reading groups, or special programs (however, since most of these students went to rural schools, these types of opportunities were limited). The variety of mental health disorders and symptoms among the participants included:

- Depression (seasonal, major, general, and double depression)
- Anxiety
- Panic attacks
- Bipolar Disorder
- Obsessive Compulsive Disorder
- Anorexia
- Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
- Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
- Cutting

- Suicide Ideation
- Autism

Most of these mental health conditions were formally diagnosed with my participants, however a few decided to go undiagnosed because of social stigma or wanting to find their own coping mechanisms without medication and/or counseling. Some of these twice-exceptional individuals had multiple mental health issues within the list above.

Another goal for my sample was to have a balanced representation of genders as well as some variety of ethnicity, sexuality, and social class diversity. Kerr and McKay (2014) and Webb et al. (2005) emphasize that depending on your gender, ethnic, and other forms of diversity, the twice-exceptional experience can be very different. In the end, I interviewed 11 women and 2 men. Although not an ideal balance of gender representation, I reached a saturation point in terms of patterns and themes. To reconcile the lack of male representation in my participants, I asked questions in my second interviews that tried to flesh out why my participants thought more women than men came forward to share their twice-exceptional experiences. The primary reason why participants thought more females versus males came forward was it due to cultural stigma against men who are emotional and/or vulnerable—especially in midwestern culture. Additionally, I asked these second interviewees how they saw the twice-exceptional experience as different for men and women. Luckily, quite a few of my female participants had fathers, brothers, friends, and significant others who would be categorized as twice-exceptional, so there were interesting findings on intersectionality of gender and twice-exceptionality.

Materials and Procedures

Since twice-exceptionalism is a sensitive experience for many, it was important to provide a private and neutral space for my interviews. Since I lived in Moscow, Idaho, at the time of the interviews, I set up videoconferences with the students and made sure both they and I were in private and quiet spaces without the risk of outsiders overhearing the interviews. These interviews were held in my office at home. Because I had professional connections to students and faculty at this particular university, I emphasized that there was not to be repercussions for participating or not participating in the interviews.

Before each of interviews began, each participant read and signed a consent form explaining the study and interview process (for the videoconference interviews I sent the consent form in advance for the interviewee to look over and send back to me through email). I reminded the participants that their comments would remain anonymous (unless they expressed they were in immediate danger to themselves) and that I would change their names in my dissertation. I provided a clear and concise definition of twice-exceptionalism, however I used terminology like *gifted* and *mental health* in my interview questions for clarity's sake. Lastly, I explained the format of the interview, as far as how many questions and time estimate, as well as provided them with my contact information.

During the interviews, I used videoconferencing to video and audio record and took open notes in a journal. These methods helped identify any themes, patterns, facial expressions, gestures, and other observations I found significant to my analysis. Since these interviews may have been the first time the twice-exceptional individual felt their stories and experiences were being heard, it was highly important for myself, as the

interviewer, to be attentive, comfortable with emotion, respectful, and aware of my own body language. Additionally, I took the time after the interviewee left the session to privately jot down any immediate reflection notes that may have been useful in my research.

The audio and video recordings of the interviews were stored on my password protected cloud storage account (Dropbox). Any written notes were typed up and saved to this account. I am the only one who has access to the data I collected. After three years, I will delete all data from my accounts and hard drive. The consent forms and personal data are stored in a binder in a secure, locked drawer. I will shred the forms after three years.

I conducted the interviews using semi-structured interviewing techniques (Roulston, 2010). I had an interview protocol for both (described below), but as is traditional in semi-structured interviews, I explored emergent topics that interviewees raised and asked follow-up and probing questions. The interviews lasted between 45 minutes to 1 hour. Additionally, I set up shorter interview sessions after the initial interview with certain participants to glean more information after they had time to reflect on our discussion. Follow-up and clarifying questions were asked with participant consent. I asked participants to review transcripts and my interpretations of them for member checking (validity) purposes.

After asking if they have any questions or concerns, I began the interview. For my study, process questions over variance questions were most useful. Process questions lend towards a more qualitative approach since they "...focus on *how* things happen, rather than *whether* there is a particular relationship or how much it is explained by other

variables” (Robson & McCartan, 2016, p. 62). Variance questions, on the other hand, often begin with “How much...” or “To what extent...” and produce more quantitative data (Robson & McCartan, 2016, p. 62). Since my study was exploratory, most of my questions were process questions. The following is a list of interview questions I asked my interview subjects:

- 1) Describe the process of getting labeled as gifted.
- 2) At what age did you start to struggle with your mental health? Were you diagnosed with a mental health issue? If so, what kind?
- 3) Did your K-12 teachers support gifted individuals? How or how not?
 - Probe: Describe a time where you did feel supported by your teachers during your K-12 experience.
 - Probe: Describe a time where you did not feel support by your teachers during your K-12 experience.
 - Probe: Did you have accelerated classes or other programs in your K-12 schools to support your giftedness and mental health?
- 4) Describe what it like was to be a gifted person with a mental health issue among your peers during your K-12 experience.
 - Probe: Describe a time where you did feel supported by your peers during your K-12 experience.
 - Probe: Describe a time where you did not feel support by your peers during your K-12 experience.
- 5) Describe what it was like to be a gifted person with a mental health issue among your family members.

6) Do you think your giftedness and mental health interact with one another? How so?

7) How has being a gifted person with a mental health issue changed since arriving to college?

- Probe: Do you feel supported by your professors? How or how not?
- Probe: Do you feel supported by your peers? How or how not?

8) Think of a time when your mental health has affected your college academic performance. Describe.

9) Think of a time when your mental health has affected your college social life. Describe.

10) What could your professors do to assist you with your mental health and giftedness?

11) How could the university administration and staff better support your mental health and giftedness?

- Probe: What types of school academic or mental health services or programs do you already utilize?
- Probe: What types of school services or programs would you like to see developed?

12) Is there anything else you would like to share with me about your experience as a gifted individual with mental health issues?

Although I provided some examples of probes I followed up with, there were times I had to switch up some of these questions and probes depending on the stories the interviewee shared. Qualitative research is usually exploratory; hence the researcher needs to be

flexible when listening and interacting with their interviewees. During the interviews, there were a mix of silent probes (waiting for their answer or expansion), echo probes (repeating what was said for clarification), and tell-me-more probes (asking for their feelings, thoughts, or expansion on an answer) (Robson & McCartan, 2016).

Validity

In order to ensure the trustworthiness, credibility, rigor, and transferability of my twice-exceptional research, my study used varying forms of validity (Robson & McCartan, 2016, p. 171). My usage of multiple interviews and many scholarly researched documents provided for ample data triangulation in order to crosscheck each other. As expressed earlier, methodological triangulation was critical in my research through the use of narrative and discourse analysis (Robson & McCartan, 2016, p. 171).

Throughout my research, I had to keep my own personal experiences with twice-exceptionalism and bias in check. Although I was inspired to research this topic because of my background as well as other friends' and family members' experiences, I did not want this to shadow my judgement. When conducting qualitative research,

...it is impossible to deal with these issues by eliminating the researcher's theories, beliefs, and perceptual lens. Instead, qualitative research is primarily concerned with understanding how a particular researcher's values and expectations may have influenced the conduct and conclusions of the study (which may be either positive or negative) and avoiding the negative consequences of these. (Maxwell, 2013, p. 124)

Being twice-exceptional myself, I tried to be very cognizant of not coloring my participants' experiences with my own. Twice-exceptionality can look very different from one person to the next. During the actual interviews, I made sure not to insert my

own personal stories to the participants. This was difficult at times since it is normal to want to connect with someone who has a similar experience as you. But the interviews were not for me; they were an opportunity for the twice-exceptional participants to tell their stories and be heard. I presented myself as an attentive listener through non-verbal cues such as nodding and asking clarifying questions in order to represent them accurately.

In order to combat these biases from my own personal experiences and theories, member checking was essential. Once I transcribed the interviews, I provided each participant a copy of their interview to read over and confirm they were represented accurately in the interview. Once I completed my final draft of my findings chapter, I sent the entire chapter to all of the participants to review. Some of the participants did not reply with any comments, but those who did were very pleased with how their story was represented as well as how their twice-exceptional experience was related to the other participants. Gina replied to my email by saying it was amazing to read her voice in print. She also gave me a life update that she went to the doctor shortly after her interview and was officially diagnosed with attention deficit disorder and anxiety. She said, "I've been feeling super motivated and confident." Another participant, June, replied "I think it is wonderful and loved how I was represented." It was imperative to ensure each interviewee felt like my research represented them accurately. This is "...a very valuable means of guarding against researcher bias. It also demonstrates to them that you value their perceptions and contributions" (Robson & McCartan, 2016, p. 172). Again, since this may have been the first time these college students expressed their

experiences with twice-exceptionalism, member checking not only built additional trust but also personal emancipation from being heard and recognized by another individual.

Lastly, there was a detailed audit trail throughout my research. This included my full interview transcripts, research journal notes, literature review texts, and details of my data analysis (Robson & McCartan, 2016, p. 172). By keeping detailed notes and saving all portions of my data collection, not only did this provide me with greater credibility and trustworthiness as a researcher, but it also demonstrated academic rigor.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

Before I began my interviews, I planned for it to take a considerable amount of time to develop enough trust with the participants for them to share their experiences with a sensitive topic. To my surprise, however, most of my participants seemed hungry for the chance to be heard. Many of the college men and women revealed this was the first time they had openly spoken about their struggle with mental health and giftedness. Quite a few of them read the description of twice-exceptionalism in my call for participants and finally had a name for what they had been experiencing for years. One of my participants expressed,

I'd like to say that I'm grateful that you're doing this research because many times throughout my university experience...I've been thinking about how it extended beyond into my elementary and middle school and high school years, but feeling how I haven't always been supported going throughout college, and how I wish that there were resources or just a different outlook by those who are not making things the easiest, not just people, but institutions or practices or policies. So, I think there are a lot of gaps...

Luckily, with the help from my participants, they revealed many of the gaps on college campuses for twice-exceptional students. Each of my participants' twice-exceptional experiences were unique from one another in terms of mental health diagnoses, K-12

gifted education experiences, and overall personal functionality, however these major themes emerged:

- Masking mental health problems
- Pressure to excel
- Social anxiety and isolation
- Social stigma of mental health problems
- How mental health and giftedness interact
- Intersectionality of twice-exceptionality and gender
- University support

As part of the descriptive discussion of these themes, I use discourse analysis with many of the passages to indicate when the participants were using affective stance (moments of feeling and/or emotional intensity), epistemic stance (less emotive phrases that are informational), expressive speech acts (moments of expressing the speaker's emotional state), representative speech acts (moments of expressing something as true and representative of the speaker) as well as areas where they were hedging (vague language that usually indicates caution) their words (Strauss and Feiz, 2014). Through this process, these twice-exceptional voices were brought to the surface and ultimately came into conversation with one another.

Masking Mental Health: “*Fake it ‘til you make it. Pretend that you’re strong enough and maybe one day you will be.*” ~Maggie

As indicated in my literature review, some twice-exceptional individuals mask their mental health issues very well from the public eye (Clance & Imes, 1978; Kerr & McKay, 2014; Miller, Falk, & Haung, 2009; Young, 2011). These college students can

appear to be high-performing and highly motivated to their professors, peers, and family—which results in little concern over what they might be fighting with inside. Maggie, a second-year psychology student with diagnosed ADHD, anxiety, major depression, and insomnia, comes from a family that was open about speaking about mental health. At home, she explains her ability to hide her mental health from her peers was different because she felt a sense of security with her parents. Now at college, hiding her mental health is more isolating:

My friends, the friends that I have made throughout college, they know because they know me, but I'm pretty good at hiding it. So, if you were to ask most of the people I have done group projects with or I have classes with, like, "Hey. Do you think she has depression, or anxiety, or any of it?" They'd be like, "No, not at all." Because I'm good at hiding things. That's how I've had to survive. And that's part of the anxiety and part of just like the, "No, because if you start talking to someone and you let them see how messed up, how broken and messed up you really are, they'll know and they'll say something." And so it was just like...conceal, don't feel...Don't let anyone know what's going on.

For a person who has struggled with mental health from a very young age, Maggie is incredibly confident and matter of fact about her twice-exceptional experience. Many of my participants had a lot of moments of affective stance, meaning their speech acts came from an emotive place. However, Maggie uses few phrases of epistemic stance (underlined above) that are very unemotional and firmly representative of how she functions as a twice-exceptional individual (Strauss and Feiz, 2014). When she was sharing her experience with isolation, it was striking how straightforward she delivered

this information. Her eyes and voice were void of any sadness or anger—which seemed very indicative of how the isolation that sometimes comes with being a twice-exceptional person can be quite numbing and a mode of survival. She sees masking her mental health as a necessity in order not to succumb to the vulnerable emotionality of mental health.

Though some of my participants, like Maggie, were open about their mental health with their families, there were some who did not experience this type of openness with their parents or siblings. Karrie, a college senior diagnosed with depression and anxiety, chooses to hide her mental health experiences from all family members except her mother:

Well, to be completely honest, my mom is the only one in my immediate family that knows of my mental health...I feel like if I were to say to my family that I have things going on, that would change their perception of me. Whether that's good or bad, *I don't want to be given more attention because I have mental health problems, but I also don't want to be seen as, "Oh, well, it's just because she has anxiety, that's why she's stressed out all the time."* I don't want them to put their own feelings into who I am.

By masking her mental health from other family members, Karrie can control others' perceptions of her. She uses a representative speech act (the italicized phrase) in order to firmly situate her identity within her family. She went on to explain that two of her cousins have learning disabilities, which means her family gives a lot of attention to them. Because they spend time focusing on these cousins, she was never praised for her own academic successes. If she were to reveal her struggles with depression and anxiety, she would not want this to be what her relatives used to define her.

Stephanie, a first-year student with self-diagnosed anxiety, describes hiding her mental health from family in order to protect them:

So I feel like I have to hide whatever I'm feeling, well, from all of them have to feel like you have to hide what you're feeling worried about, because you don't want them to worry about you because you're going away so you don't want them to be worried about you. *I don't know if that made any sense.*

Like other twice-exceptional individuals, Stephanie has a difficult time trying to explain exactly why she feels like she has to hide her mental health from her family (expressive speech acts underlined). She ends this passage by hedging (italicized), indicating self-doubt (Strauss and Feiz, 2014). She went on to reveal that her father is gifted and struggles with anxiety; however, his way of managing it is “dealing with it.” This idea of being able to control your mental health was a common thread throughout many of the interviews. Some of the participants indicated they felt that dealing with your mental health by essentially “pulling yourself up by your bootstraps” was indicative of the midwestern culture around them. There will be expansion on this idea in the section on social stigma and mental health.

Another participant, Zane, told me that he belongs to a family of intellectuals. Between the seven siblings, there is a statistician, a few biochemists, a cytogeneticist, a nuclear engineer, and an aerospace engineer. He decided to study physics during college. Despite having the common trait of giftedness, Zane describes that masking his depression and anxiety from family was more due to feelings of discomfort with the topic:

Yeah, pretty much all I know is that we all struggle with something... So I have a little sister I think she struggled with depression when she was a teenager. *But I guess a lot of people kind of, that's the time to struggle with it...* But yeah, I didn't know like my mom mentioned struggling with depression and my dad's struggling with depression, and I didn't know that 'til like a couple of years ago or something like that. And the first person I knew about was my older brother when he was in college and that wasn't until I was like, oh jeez, I was probably 17 when I heard about that. And yeah, like it was last year that I heard from my sisters 'cause it's kinda getting around the family that I was having some issues in college with my mental health, and so I was getting all these texts from my family members saying like, "Oh, here's some things that I did that helped me," or, "Here's something that helped me kind of learn about myself," and some of them, my sisters said that they had varying types of bipolar disorder or anxiety. I was like, "Oh, I never knew that. We don't talk about this all that much." I don't know if that's a commonality between my sisters and my mom, 'cause I noticed with my mom, she doesn't like talking about things that make her uncomfortable... Whenever I try bringing up these kinds of harder topics with her, I usually find that she ends up changing the subject or not answering my question.

It is not surprising that Zane had more moments of epistemic stance than affective stance in his interview (underlined). Being raised in a family of scientists could lead a person to be very factual, even with seemingly emotional events like being diagnosed with mental health (Strauss and Feiz, 2014). When he was recounting his experience of discovering his family struggled with various mental health issues, his tone was fairly unchanging and

unemotional even though his words indicated that he was surprised about finding out his family's history. He also had a moment of hedging his thoughts about mental health problems (italicized) to indicate that this is something that a lot of people struggle with, so his experience is not unique. Although Zane's siblings gradually opened up about their own experiences of mental health issues during adulthood, there remains hesitancy to discuss these issues with each other since it makes themselves and their mother uncomfortable. These feelings of discomfort can cause further masking of mental health problems.

While some twice-exceptional college students mask their mental health by not talking about it with their peers and professors, others know their mental health issues must have some sort of release, but in private. Gina, a first-year college student with self-diagnosed anxiety and seasonal affective disorder (SAD). SAD is a sort of depression that is brought on by the changing seasons, usually starting in the fall/winter with the decreased hours of light. People with SAD usually have low energy and feel depressed almost every day during these dark months (Mayo Clinic, n.d.). Since my participants live in the area of the country that has a long, dark winter season, I was not surprised to hear that some of them identified with having SAD. Gina describes her masking experience like this:

I just have to cry until the feeling goes away and then once the feeling goes away, I can resume. And it usually takes...It can take anywhere from 45 minutes to three hours to just get over the episode. But if I have something that I have to do, then I can get over it. It's more like, if I have class in 10 minutes, I can hold off the feeling and I can wait, but it has to come out eventually, so once I know I have

time to kinda have the breakdown, I let myself have time. It's not enabling, it's not stopping me from getting stuff done, but it does have to come out eventually.

It is clear that Gina knows exactly her process to mask her mental health issues (representative speech acts underlined). Gina continues to function when it comes to her academics, but realizes she needs to allow herself time to privately break down. This is illustrative of Dabrowski's theory of positive disintegration since he viewed,

certain psychopathological symptoms (particularly neurosis and even some psychoses) as an essential step toward personality development...the behaviors (or symptoms) they experience (e.g., excessive anxiety or compulsive behavior) along the path of development do not indicate pathology, but rather reflect a mentally health process of development. (Daniels & Piechowski, 2009, p. 86)

Gina realizes that she needs time to break down or collapse with her anxiety for her to continue to function as a student and develop as a gifted individual (Daniels & Piechowski, 2009).

Zane's approach to mental health release is more public than Gina's, but he can mask it from his peers and professors through developing a believable story:

I actually...I started cutting myself on my hand and professors questioned it at first, but then I was like, "Oh..." it's kind of funny 'cause a lot of lies start out kind of based in truth, and what had happened is I started volunteering at a pet shelter and I had been kinda scratched up by some kittens I was playing with. And then going forward, I just kept using that excuse to just kind of explain the cuts away to people who had asked, and then the professors just kinda accepted my excuse for that...they would come to class and be like, "Oh my God...did you

drop your hand in a wood chipper or something or...” kind of half joking remarks like that.

Again, Zane is able to speak of very emotional experiences with his struggle with depression by using epistemic stance—he pulls the emotion out of his past and volunteers the facts. Throughout his interview, even when speaking about his moments of suicidal thoughts, Zane’s facial expressions and voice were very even and stoic (Strauss and Feiz, 2014). Sometimes these unemotional stances and tones can be caused by the effect of the medications people with mental health issues are taking to relieve their symptoms. In Zane’s interview, he mentioned going to a psychiatrist off and on and several counselors. He said that he would self-medicate with caffeine at times to make him feel more energized. However, he did not indicate that he was medicated. He went on to explain that the practice of cutting was a mechanism of release and control for him to deal with his mental health. Additionally, cutting was a way for him to find release when he felt that he was underperforming in his schoolwork. Cutting was his method of positive disintegration—breaking down in order to progress forward through his twice-exceptional identity (Daniels & Piechowski, 2009).

Among my participants, a few indicated that they masked their mental health from those around them by using humor. Rebecca, a college senior with self-diagnosed anxiety, remembers her constant struggle with her high school math classes. Her anxiety would become so high that she cried in class regularly. Rebecca would also use humor to deflect her anxiety during her math classes:

So I just talked about it as if I was also joking the whole time. When I would tell people about math class I’m like, “Oh, just prepare to cry all the time,” as a joke

or whatever. And saying like, “Oh, don’t worry. I did my homework. It’s tear-stained, but it’s done,” or whatever. I always made jokes about it even though they were probably not true all the time...

In high school, Rebecca was freer with openly showing her anxiety to others by crying in class. However, she would try to mask some of this anxiety by deflecting with dark humor. Similarly, Zane used humor to mask his depression and anxiety from his college friends. He explains,

I try not to have too dark of a sense of humor, but I guess how you kinda let your guard down and relax your standards a bit around your friends and...I don’t know if I would necessarily make jokes about killing myself and stuff like that, but the style of dark humor is usually characteristic...Well, I shouldn’t say characteristic necessarily, but I’m kind of under the impression that it’s kind of a bit of a coping mechanism that depressed people use, and I suppose my friends were probably under that same impression as well.

Whether a twice-exceptional person uses humor, private breakdowns, or isolation to mask their mental health, these methods make detecting mental health in gifted individuals difficult. Although my participant interviews indicated very clearly these twice-exceptional students struggle every day, it is apparent that it would be challenging for a professor, staff member, or administrator to detect these top-performing students as needing assistance with minimal interaction with them each week.

Pressure to Excel: “*You have to put in 110% effort in those classes, because they don’t expect anything less from you.*” ~Karrie

It may come as no surprise that gifted college students experience a lot of pressure to excel in school. Some of this pressure comes from external sources like parents and professors. However, many of these students generate a lot of internal pressure to be the absolute best academically. This constant pressure to succeed exasperates twice-exceptional students’ mental health struggles to the next level.

Rebecca comes from a family that put a high premium on achieving good grades in school. Her older sister did very well in school which set an expectation of high achievement in her family. She describes her experience with external and internal pressure like this:

I remember my mom sitting me down when I got a D on a science test in like elementary, middle school and giving me a talk like, “You don’t do this, you’re not like a person who gets Ds on tests or something.” So there’s been just a lot of pressure to do well in that stuff. Like obviously I wanna do well at work, so that I keep my job and people at work don’t hate me type of thing. But there’s not that same pressure of like if you don’t get these grades, you’ll never succeed in life, and you’ve been so smart before. Why would you ever get a D... There’s just a lot of pressure that you’re not gonna succeed if you don’t pass college or get good grades and stuff. So, I’ve noticed there’s even more pressure and it’s really probably eating away at me, emotionally and mentally.

When Rebecca explained that her mother sat her down and told her she was not a person who receives Ds on tests, this language indicates that grades are tied to her identity.

When twice-exceptional students hear these types of comments about grades early on in their lives, the external pressure can transform into internal pressure later in their adulthood. Many of my participants expressed that if they receive a “bad” grade, it often is a slight against their internal pressure for overall success.

June, a 35-year-old non-traditional college student, shared that her experience with internal and external pressure began at an early age as well. Contrasting from some of my other participants, she grew up in a family who did not mask their mental health from each other. Her mother and father have bipolar and schizophrenia and her sister has mild depression. Even though mental health was an everyday experience in her family, June describes her childhood home life as unhealthy. By the time she was 14, she was diagnosed with severe anxiety disorder and suffered a sexual trauma. She describes the manifestation of her internal pressure with schoolwork in this way:

I used to throw up every morning from the time I was in kindergarten, until I graduated. Because I felt such an immense pressure to be perfect, that if I didn't make straight As, if I didn't know all the answers, if I wasn't the perfect student, that I was letting my parents down, my teachers down, and my peers down. So I had to strive to be the perfect student.

Again, this is an example of a twice-exceptional student who feels like there is external pressure to excel for their family, teachers, and peers. But in reality, June was placing internal pressure on herself to achieve perfection. In her adult life, she still has the perfectionistic trait: “Honestly, I would say that my anxiety amplifies my need to be a perfectionist. And if I get asked a question and I'm put on the spot and I don't know, I

make sure that I know before the class is over...I don't like being put on the spot and not knowing what the answer is.”

Although continually receiving stellar grades is commonly viewed as a marker for success, there is a certain amount of pressure to maintain that excellence. Karrie describes the external pressure she feels from her professors:

I feel like once you've reached a certain level of an expectation, your professors know that you are able to do a certain amount of work or a certain type of challenging leveled work, that they don't expect anything less. And I understand that, but I think that life sometimes gets in the way...I think that sometimes we're doing our best anyway, those who are exceptional students, that we're doing our best, and just because we didn't, doesn't mean we weren't trying as hard as normal. I think that we're just held to such a high standard that it gets really stressful, because I know my professors expect me to do well.

Setting the bar high from the beginning of a twice-exceptional student's college career causes a fair amount of pressure that is seen as external from the student's perspective (even if the professors are not criticizing them about their performance. In reality, this perceived external pressure from professors could generate internal pressure by the student to maintain their good grades or beat their top score. Karrie describes, “I also push myself a lot. If I'm not getting the grades I want, then I'm really hard on myself. My parents tell me that a lot, they're like, ‘Calm down, you got a B. [chuckle] You're okay.’ I'm like, ‘But you don't understand. I could have done better.’” The concept of “not doing well” can be a very different experience for a twice-exceptional individual. Many of my participants draw their own benchmarks for success, which tend to be very high

compared to what was expected of them by their families and professors. When a gifted student stresses over getting a B, it may seem comical to the outside perspective. However, if their benchmark for failure is a B, then it is a very real and stressful experience for the twice-exceptional student.

There were a few twice-exceptional participants who reached a point of internal pressure that produced a low benchmark for success—keeping themselves alive. Zane reflects,

And one of the things that's occurred to me over the past few months...was that having goals really helps keep you motivated and stuff like that. *And my only goal for the latter half of college was not to kill myself pretty much.* And so that was part of the reason why I wasn't making very much progress in my research or anything like that, 'cause my standards were so low for what I had to accomplish. *It was just: I have to just stay alive longer, which is eventually...It led me to kind of disposing of my live ammunition and selling most of my guns, which I kind of accrued.*

Although twice-exceptional college students can continue to achieve high grades despite their struggles with mental health, some reach such a low point that their standard for achievement is keeping themselves alive. I was struck by the moments of epistemic stance (italicized) when he was describing his prevention of suicide. He spoke about his thoughts of suicide separated from emotion (Strauss & Feiz, 2014). When he was telling me this story, his voice was very even and unemotional about his personal goal of not killing himself. Zane revealed to me that he struggled with compulsions for dark thoughts of self-injury, like throwing himself in traffic or playing with his guns by taking them

apart and putting them back together. At a certain point, his internal pressure to meet his goal of not taking his own life, allowed him to graduate college and ultimately getting rid of his guns.

Social Anxiety and Isolation: “*Oh, yeah...I can’t make it tonight.*” ~Stephanie

Social anxiety and isolation were the most prominent patterns among my twice-exceptional participants. Many of the participants explained their anxiety and isolation was triggered by socializing outside of classes—going to parties, participating in extracurricular groups, and even learning how to interact with their roommate in the residence halls. However, some of the social anxiety participants described was caused by the notion of going to class and being around peers.

Much like the general population of college students, the first semester of college often comes with a big learning curve when it comes to being on your own for the first time. Students learn how to do their own laundry, create a study schedule, and even find the perfect group to sit with in the cafeteria. All of these discoveries can be anxiety producing, but being a twice-exceptional individual can amplify this transitional experience. Maggie, a second-year psychology student who was diagnosed with ADHD, anxiety, and depression describes her first semester of college:

The first semester, I got so depressed, I didn’t leave my room for about a month and a half...It was just I didn’t want to leave my room. I couldn’t drag myself out of bed...there were a few classes where I was able to drag myself out of bed and make it to a few classes. But the first semester, it was before I could bring myself to go talk to anyone. Because in my mind, it was always like, “I don’t know

what's wrong with me, but I should be strong enough to handle this...No, I need to prove that I deserve to be here.”

It's not because I was lazy and didn't want to get up in the morning. It was that in the morning, I knew that there was gonna be a surplus of students. In the morning, I knew that there was gonna be so many people and I knew that if I was able to force myself up, I wouldn't be able to hide it from that many people...*I care about school. It's my biggest thing. School is my way to prove that I'm good enough, that I'm worth being around. And it sounds irrational, but it is. That's always been my thing. I wasn't the funny one...I was the smart one.*

Maggie managed to keep her good grades, despite the fact that she missed so much class. The representative speech act she uses towards the end of this passage (italicized) situates her identity firmly as a high achieving student—it's how she proves her worth (Strauss & Feiz, 2014). Isolation for her was a way of self-preservation—hiding her mental health from the peers and faculty around her. Like other gifted participants I interviewed, she indicates her frustration of not being able to handle her depression and anxiety through logic and will power.

Other participants said they were able to go to class with their social anxiety, but it did not mean they were fully present while they were there. Danielle, a second-year pre-med student with OCD, started struggling with her mental health when she was in middle school. She described her OCD as not the stereotypical disorder where individuals experience repetitive patterns. Rather, her OCD was more about intense creative thoughts that did not make sense to others. For example, she used to think if she did not shut off a light switch ten times that her house would burn down and her family would die.

This diagnosis followed after some traumatic events in Danielle's life. Her grandfather committed suicide around this time period. Her sister also left home and she has not spoken with her since she left. After these major experiences, a stress-induced fear of the world took over. For the most part, Danielle was able to control these types of behaviors during the school day, but she would come home and wash her hands for an hour and a half. Her mother, a gifted and talented educator, would try to calm her down, but nothing really could calm her down. At school, Danielle would sit at the front of her chair because she was afraid of getting sick from the chair. She would sit with her arms crossed in order to prevent her hands touching the desk and avoided touching others.

Danielle feels a bit more at ease with her mental health at college, but it still affects her daily academic life. She explains:

Yeah, it would definitely be the daily...Day to day things, like going to class...opening the doors that so many people have touched, or sitting in a desk that so many other kids have sat in, or using a clicker that so many other kids have used, that kind of thing. Just, it grosses me out, [chuckle] and it's like a constant, constant thought in my head, but I'm not to the point anymore where I need to go wash my hands for 40 minutes 'cause I touched a doorknob that 20 other kids touched before me. It's just, it's to the point where it's a tiring thought and I wish that I didn't have to be afraid of the world all the time, but at this point honestly, it's normal for me and I don't really notice anymore...

Although Danielle attends her classes, the anxiety over the germs on each item her body touches in the classroom is at the forefront of her mind. Because her mother has expertise in one of her exceptionalities, she continues to help Danielle through some of these

twice-exceptional experiences; however that does not mean her OCD disappears when she steps into a college classroom.

Other participants described the process of isolating themselves from the faculty teaching their courses—even when they needed assistance. For some of these participants, not seeking help from their teachers started as early as elementary school. Kerrie remembers her K-12 experience like this:

...the teachers tend to focus on those who need more help in that type of classroom because they know the students that are more advanced are going to be fine; they'll make it by themselves...*I feel really selfish* to say that because, yes, I didn't technically need their help, but having the attention or the bigger classroom of just all people that are in the same boat as you, helps a lot I think, too.

Twice-exceptional students can be isolated from their other peers from the very beginning of their education. In a full classroom of varying ranges of academic ability, it is understandable when teachers focus on those students who are struggling with certain subjects. The gifted population, although considered a special education population, often receives less attention since they appear to be excelling. It's not surprising, when individuals like Maggie, use affective stance to describe their feelings of selfishness (italicized) when other students need help academically (Strauss & Feiz, 2014).

Classroom isolation is an experience that can follow these gifted students all the way through college and how they interact or do not interact with faculty. Maggie explains, "...the students who don't know what's going on, they need the teacher more than I do. So, it's always been a, 'Why am I going to bother them and waste their office hours when I know that there are students out there who are struggling, who need them more than I

do?” Some high achieving students come to college not knowing how to study since school has been easy for them until this point. Just like some of my twice-exceptional participants expressed that they think they should be able to logically think their way out of their mental health problems, they also think they should be able to navigate college academics by themselves. Many of my participants described hesitancy to reach out to their faculty for academic help because the general population of students need more assistance than they do. Instead of embracing what they do not understand, or more importantly, being able to go further in their classes by speaking with a professor, they isolate themselves since they were able to excel in their academics before attending college.

Although some of my participants expressed feeling social anxiety and isolation when it came to attending class, the most impactful cause of these patterns came with interacting with peers outside of class. Brie, a fifth-year pre-med student who has anorexia, anxiety, and depression, explains that her college peers did not understand when she did not want to spend time with them outside of class. Her anxiety “...kind of lessened my ability to socially interact with others.” Additionally, the pre-med students in her courses tend to be very competitive and highly focused on the end goal. Brie said,

I try to surround myself by people who are not that way, and although it’s hard to find a pre-med student who isn’t competitive, there are people out there that are just more kind, see more nuance in the world... Yeah, I don’t always feel supported, and if I can’t find the people that are supportive of me... If I can’t, I just keep to my own, kind of as a defense mechanism maybe, or just trying to survive in a difficult academic program.

Brie mentions a very key element of isolation being a defense mechanism or self-preservation tactic used by other twice-exceptional college students to navigate the social world of college. In a program in which the students are outwardly competitive with each other, being anxious might be seen as a weakness.

The compulsion to remain socially isolated is not necessarily an easy one. Quite a few of my participants described being torn on whether to socialize with their peers or not. Brie describes this dichotomy well:

...there are times where I wanna be with people but *I fear what could happen*, the bad things that could happen. Yeah. So, like last night, thinking about maybe going out and celebrating a friend's 21st, but it was a mixture of factors, but one, I was tired, 'cause I worked all day, and two, *I was fearing rejection. Fearing just saying something* or...Being anxious about being anxious about just a number of things that could go wrong in those situations...you'll feel pulled, like "*Oh, well, something bad could happen, but yet I'm lonely*"...Yeah, I deal with that internally. But then, when you talk with friends like not being reliable, that can be...Some people can be really understanding and get it, and others, not so much. And so I think that my desire to protect them from that and myself has kept me from even making friends. And I have a lot of friends, but I don't have a lot of close friends because I just...*I feel I just don't wanna let them down*...So it's like I put up this barrier for myself and for others. So yeah, it's definitely impeded on my ability to have good relationships with my peers in class, and friends outside of class.

Again, Brie positions herself by using affective stance (italicized) when using emotion to describe her experiences (Strauss & Feiz, 2014). She desires making connections with others, however she is self-preserving through choosing isolation. This section of her interview struck me because she is not only protecting herself but others around her. She does not want to hurt her friends by being unreliable, so if you do not commit to a social outing at least they know you are not attending. This behavior reminded me of what other participants expressed about masking their twice-exceptionalism—this internal pressure to present a particular put-together, high achieving façade to the outside world.

Other participants also expressed this fight between loneliness and isolation when it came to their social life choices. Karrie describes her social patterns on the weekend like this:

There's times on the weekends, a lot of people, they wanna go out, but instead I'd much rather just be sleeping. And I think, that's more of the depression part of the illness, where you just want to be isolated....But I'd rather do that than study on a Friday night, or go out, or whatever...So, I'd much rather be at home on a Friday and Saturday night...I think that a lot of times, I think I'm more busy than I am, 'cause I'm constantly thinking of all these things I need to do...I feel like a lot of the time, I'm telling her "no," but that's because I feel like I'm too busy to go...And then when it comes down to it, and that's the day of, then I'm like, "Oh I actually probably could have gone, but I don't want to anymore, 'cause I already told her I was busy."

Carrie shared that she has a difficult time sleeping at night because of her anxiety about schoolwork, which then keeps her in a constant state of fatigue. Weekends are a time for

her to isolate and get caught up on sleep and homework. When high-achieving students are experiencing internal and/or external pressure to do well in school, there never appears to be enough time to prepare. Over-studying is not uncommon among gifted students with anxiety. When interviewing Karrie, this seemed to be the case when deciding to let down her roommate when she gave her invitations to social events—even when she had plenty of time for schoolwork and a social life.

There were a few of my participants that took isolation to a higher level by requesting a residence hall room for themselves or living alone in an apartment later on. Anne, a first-year college student with diagnosed bipolar, anxiety, and PTSD, began her school year with a roommate in the honors residence hall. Her roommate struggled with many undiagnosed mental health issues and would speak to Anne about these experiences. Anne describes her roommate as having,

an overwhelming amount of mental illness herself, but she hasn't gotten help for it before so it's a very unstable sort of...It's just, I've gotten help for mine before so I feel like I'm at a bit better of a position. She and I clashed in that sense, because she became not good for me because, you've put two people with struggling mental illness in a room together...That's probably not gonna have the best results.

These conversations with her roommate led to Anne's mental health taking a turn for the worse—she tried overdosing on her medications and was hospitalized. Ultimately, part of her recovery plan was to move to another room. She explains,

Now, I live in a room by myself. And to be honest, I hide in here a lot of the time. [chuckle] I think in some ways it's nice because I'm an introvert. I get some alone

time and I get, I just get to do what I want with the room and everything, but it also gives me the opportunity to just like, like I said, hide in here.

In one sense, being in her own room gives her the freedom to control the space to help her anxiety levels. But she expressed being isolated physically from other students makes it difficult to relate to her peers as well as make friends.

Zane shared that since he was labeled as gifted as a child and diagnosed with mental health issues, it isolated him from his peers. He felt isolated from students his own age because he struggled to relate to people on a social level but also could not relate to them intellectually either. Now as an adult, he thinks he might be on the Autism spectrum. He has always resisted maintaining appropriate eye and physical contact. During his K-12 experience, this made him an easy target for bullying and teasing from his peers and part of the complication was that he did not know how to properly react to such actions. He always struggled to identify whether his peers were making jokes or they were being serious about the words they were saying to him. So isolation became a method of self-preservation. Since Zane graduated from college, he notices how some of his patterns of social anxiety and isolation from K-12 and college seep into the way he interacts with people now. He reflects,

Even now I'm still trying to learn some of those kinds of things...And I don't know if I'm just introverted by nature, or if social anxiety kept me from trying to go out and meet new people...So I suppose that was part of what kind of made me think that I might have some social anxiety, too. I was even noticing I have a really hard time answering the phone, and my job now, I have a part-time job where answering the phone is half of what I do, and so answering the phone was

really difficult, and making phone calls is even harder, and I still don't like leaving voicemails.

Isolation and social anxiety have influenced how Zane functions with seemingly normal communication tasks at work. Although isolation can help twice-exceptional individuals with self-preservation and give them a sense of control, this does not always serve them well once they leave school and enter the work force.

Social Stigma of Mental Health: *“I was raised that mental health is indicative of moral failing.” ~Luke*

Throughout the interviews, most of my participants indicated that the cultural perception of mental health is improving, but there is still a long way to go—especially in more conservative areas of the country like the Midwest. Growing up in the Midwest myself, I know this “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” mentality well. Living with harsh weather for most of the year does not leave very much room for struggle or weakness. This hardiness translates to more than those who may experience mental health—it's a way of life. Carrie describes it best when she says, “I hate being the one to ask for help, but I think I need to ask for help. Because I think it maybe a North Dakotan thing or just a pride thing, we don't like to ask when we need something... You're just kind of expected to just figure it out, it's life, get back up and ride the horse again, kind of thing.”

Many of my participants acknowledge that despite the Midwestern hardy mindset, more and more of their peers are talking about their experiences with mental health. Stephanie, a first-year student with undiagnosed anxiety, knows she probably has anxiety since her dad struggles with it. Being from a rural area, she tried to hide her mental health

from family and friends since her dad told her it's something you just have to deal with in life. Since moving to a bigger city to attend college, her anxiety when it comes to driving and socializing with her peers has increased. Stephanie realizes she has some resources on campus:

I know there's a counseling center on campus, but I have never been brave enough to go there, so I'm guessing they'd be helpful. But, I don't know. You hear a lot about anxiety in, especially the college student population, about how it's on the rise, but I think it's still definitely a stigma. I don't know what universities can do to get rid of that.

Stephanie is not alone by confessing she has never used the college's mental health services. Other twice-exceptional participants claimed they never used this service because of the social stigma of counseling, their limited time, and/or their problems were not bad enough to go in.

Unfortunately, by not asking for help when they were deeply struggling with their mental health, a few of my participants revealed they attempted to take their own lives. Even though Anne's mother knew she was diagnosed with bipolar, anxiety, and PTSD, she did not understand why her daughter continued to battle with symptoms after her diagnoses. As mentioned before, Anne was in a roommate situation that was triggering to her own mental health. With her roommate situation, being away from home for the first time, and other stressors, Anne attempted to overdose on her medication. Anne describes that time with her mother like this:

My mom, until I ended up being hospitalized for mental illness...she didn't really understand it. She just perceived me as being lazy and she thought it was

something that was easy to overcome. She was adamant that I do well in my studies, but because of my mental illness, it wasn't always the easiest for me to do well. But she wasn't understanding of that, but I'm very lucky that once I was hospitalized, she finally saw it for what it is and now she's very supportive.

The stigma of mental illness can be perceived as an individual who isn't trying hard enough to get out of their difficult situation. The word "lazy" did not just come up in Anne's interview, but in other participant interviews as well. Some even used this stigmatized word to describe themselves when they were living through tough moments with their mental health. Anne talks about this perception of mental health as laziness when it came to telling her teachers about her suicide attempt: "I remember explicitly telling one teacher that I tried to end my own life. But I tried to be as...*I either mentioned that it was a mental health concern, or that I did that, just so they would understand some of it, so they wouldn't think that I was being lazy or something like that.*" It was important for Anne to preserve some of her image as a high achieving student to her professors—seen in the representative speech act that is italicized above (Strauss & Feiz, 2014). However, the fact that she felt she had to reveal she attempted to take her life instead of just saying she had medical concerns points to the social stigma that mental health is not seen as a true medical condition to some.

Another participant I spoke with grew up in rural North Dakota and was very familiar with the social codes of his town. Luke struggled with his mental health from a very young age and was eventually diagnosed with double depression. Double depression is a combination of dysthymia (persistent, lingering depression) and major depressive disorder (intensifies for periods of short time). Luke grew up in a family who did not

believe in mental health issues. He describes being twice-exceptional individual in his family and rural community like this:

There's this perception in my family and I think in the community that I was raised in...*that mental health is indicative of the sort of moral failing, you are a bad person because you are depressed, it's a sort of weakness that you need to overcome like everyone else. Everyone else has it so bad; you don't have it any worse than anyone else.*

The representative speech act towards the end of the passage (italicized) is unfortunately very tied into Luke's identity as a person with mental health (Strauss & Feiz, 2014). Not only did he feel isolated from his peers growing up (they knew him as the smart and sad kid), he was isolated in the home he grew up in. His father was suspicious of higher education and none of his siblings graduated from a higher education institution. Luke remembers hiding that he loved music, poetry, and art from his family, because those were not socially acceptable interests for rural boys. Gifted boys and men often fear openly liking things like music, art, literature, and theatre since these are not stereotypical masculine interests (Kerr & Cohn, 2001; Kerr & Multon, 2015). Since Luke was hiding his interests and protecting his sensitive feelings with depression, his siblings viewed him as cold, distant, and narcissistic. Battling with his mental health and isolation only intensified during college.

Luke forced himself to live in the residence halls on campus longer than usual so he would be around people. He found peers who support him, but he still feels misunderstood and hollow on the inside. Since coming to college, he has been hospitalized twice for suicidal ideation. Luke said, "The second time I was hospitalized

within a month...my mom, the first thing she said to me once I got out, was that was such a loser mentality, and I just needed to straighten up and fly right, and get over it.” Despite social stigma even within his family about his mental health, luckily Luke found his way to a therapist and is treated with medication (however, he had to pay for his medication himself since his parents refused to cover it). Luke and Anne have fought their way through the dark periods of their twice-exceptional experience, but it is still an uphill battle to breakdown the social stigma and providing ample services for these individuals to thrive and be well.

How mental health and giftedness interact: “*Some of the smartest people experience the most pain.*” ~Danielle

Throughout my interviews, all of the twice-exceptional participants agreed that their giftedness and mental health interacted at some level. The common sentiment was that once they were labeled as gifted as a child, there were high expectations set for them by their families and teachers. Consequently, this manifested in a lot of internal pressure and anxiety to maintain their gifted identity. A few participants even went as far to say that they believe a person cannot be gifted without also having some sort of mental health issue. Zane shares that his psychologist believes “...that my mental health issues could be because I’m gifted, that the isolation that I experienced and the depression and anxiety that developed afterwards or vice versa could be just because I was gifted by nature and different, and then treated differently and had to learn things differently.”

As I listened to my participants describe how their giftedness and mental health interact, Dabrowski’s overexcitabilities (psychomotor, sensual, intellectual, imaginal, and emotional) became key players in the twice-exceptional experience

(Dabrowski, 1964; Daniels & Piechowski, 2009). As revealed before, Danielle experienced the overexcitabilities of intellect and emotion. During our interview, she expressed that she has often thought that there should be more attention given to gifted children's hypersensitivity since many of them are gifted emotionally. In her experience, her emotional overexcitability made her feel "crazy" in a different way from her peers:

I think a lot of times giftedness and mental health tie together because you are such a deep thinker and a deep feeler; you see the world in ways that a lot of people don't, and that comes with good things and also bad things; there's bad sides of feeling that deeply. And so, having her as a mom, was very helpful with the giftedness 'cause I would come to her and I'd be like "Oh God, why am I so worked up right now about something that happened halfway across the world?" Or like, "Why do I make these connections that nobody else can make these connections?" And she'd be like, "Okay, you gotta remember, sensitive feeling, you're a sensitive person, you feel the world in ways other people may not."

Danielle's use of a representative speech act (italicized) is a great example of owning her twice-exceptional experience with her intellectual and emotional overexcitabilities feeding into her anxious behaviors (Strauss & Feiz, 2014). She thinks critically about problematic issues in other areas of the world and grows anxious from not knowing what to do to solve the problems. In his theory of positive disintegration, Dabrowski (1964) referred to this feeling as guilt. He wrote that "guilt has a tendency to transform itself into a feeling of responsibility, which embraces the immediate environment and even all society" (p. 27). Twice-exceptional individuals often experience this feeling of wanting to find solutions to problems that may not directly affect them. Additionally, Danielle has

the strong ability to empathize with other people's tragedies. Although these abilities are important to help solve worldly problems, sometimes it can complicate a gifted individual's management of mental health. Danielle further explains,

So I think when you put those together it gets dangerous, [chuckle] like creative thinking. I'm a very logical person, but I can logic myself into illogical thoughts. So for example, if I would think I was gonna get sick from something, I could find enough creativity...somehow enough logic where it would make sense to me that I was gonna get sick from touching a doorknob...and it wasn't a cold, it was a serious illness. [chuckle] I don't know, it just makes me laugh now that I think about it. It's just so silly I thought those things. But they definitely go hand in hand. And I just had a lot of nightmares, which I think is just creative thinking, honestly. They're just freaky, they're weird. And they don't make any sense...So definitely the creative thinking that comes with being gifted, but also then it was a little too creative when I needed to talk myself into some logic."

As Danielle indicated, emotional and intellectual overexcitabilities can produce positive outcomes for the twice-exceptional individual when it comes to their creative way of looking at problems. However, when her overexcitabilities become unmanageable, her twice-exceptional experience can be an isolating and fear-inducing place.

Luke had a similar experience to Danielle with using logic to deal with his depression and anxiety. His intuition told him that he should be able to use his giftedness to think his way out of his mental health issues. He described,

So the relationship betwixt the two that I have been able to understand is that *I strive to be a very logical person and I strive to be a very thoughtful person.*

Much like Socrates *I think that the worst thing that you can possibly do with your life is not think about it.* The unexamined life is not worth living, so *I try to tackle things from a very logical perspective and if things are illogical, I have a very difficult time with them.*

Since Luke is a very reflective person, there were large portions of his interview that were representative speech acts (italicized) about his ostracizing twice-exceptional experience (Strauss and Feiz, 2014). It was a privilege to hear him describe who he is in this world for the first time. Using logic served Luke well in his academic life, however he struggled with forming relationships with the peers around him because he found them so illogical. His logical and intellectual giftedness caused him to be very isolated from his peers in K-12 and even in college. Not being able to relate to his peers on a deep level made his depression and anxiety worse. He explained,

So depression is from an emotional place, from what I understand, it's from an emotional place and it's not something that you can reason with. It is irrational...I am continually trying to reason my way out of depression, like well I can't be depressed because I actually probably had a good life, so far. I did not really interact with people very much but I was fed and cared for pretty well...or things like that but really the depression sort of wins out each time and I end up sort of rationalizing.

For twice-exceptional individuals, this inability to use their giftedness to rationalize their way out of mental health issues is a very defeating experience. Dabrowski (1964) called this rationalizing behavior *disquietude*: “the individual feels responsible for his own development; his sensitivity in regard to this feeling of responsibility (originating from

concern that the growth of his personality is insufficient) results in a restlessness about himself” (p. 25). Many of my participants described using their giftedness to control their academic and leadership achievements. However, many of them lose this sense of control when they are going through a tough time with their mental health.

Brie found her battle with anorexia and anxiety is directly related to her giftedness when it comes to her high academic performance in school. When she started to develop eating disorder symptoms, her perfectionism in school became even more severe. Gifted girls and women,

are at risk when they are perfectionistic and skilled in camouflage. There is some evidence that gifted girls who have perfectionism related to high personal standards and concern for evaluation are particularly at risk. High intelligence allows girls the ability to gather and synthesize knowledge about nutrition to use for the purpose of restricting calories. (Boone, Soenens, Braet, & Goossens, 2010; Kerr, Vuyk, & Rea, 2012)

Brie is a perfect example of this trend with her rigid relationship with eating also translated into how much she would study to get a high grade. When she still lived with her parents, they would take away her books and homework when she was in an obsessive mode of studying in order to control and/or force her eating habits. Although her obsessive studying leads to high academic achievement and could be deemed as positive from the outside observer, the anxiety aggravating this gifted performance was painful.

Once she arrived at college, her anxiety and depression still filtered into her academic life. Her anxiety fueled obsessive studying for exams and unnecessary revising

of papers. She explained that she had anxiety about her anxiety and was very concerned how her anxiousness was being reflected in her work:

I don't think people got that a lot of my performance, my good performance, was stemming from anxiety. And so they would praise me for doing well, or they would...They would praise me for doing well objectively, but then and sometimes I can remember just being so perfectionist, like almost like OCD about it, that I would spend two hours on the exam because I wanted check and re-check, and check and re-check all of my answers to make sure I got everything right. And instructors didn't really understand that and got annoyed; understandably...I think there really wasn't that awareness that there could be mental health issues... "Oh, there's a student who's...such a perfectionist and can't get anything wrong." I don't think they would see that, "Oh, like this could be an issue. This could be a function of...or a reflection of anxiety or OCD. And that this person maybe needs help..." And maybe it's just a general societal thing that people don't understand mental illness or aren't able to recognize them as being mental illness...or the symptoms of them are seen as weakness or neediness or things like that...And it was just lonely and isolating.

This is a perfect example of not being able to see beyond high achievement of gifted college students. In her perspective, Brie's professors see her as any other gifted student—persistent, diligent, and hardworking. However, when these traits get to an obsessive level, it becomes unhealthy for the twice-exceptional student.

Despite the negative behaviors Brie's mental health and giftedness bring to her daily life, she recognized that the relationship between these two things produce positive

results to her life too. She described the interaction between her anxiety and giftedness as a mechanism to propel her forward to achieve her academic goals. Her drive is often associated with her fear of failure, but it has brought her to a place as a competitive pre-medicine student. But at other times, she is motivated to go to school not because of her fear of failure, but because school is a distraction from her anxiety and depression.

Brie also sees her mental health issues coloring how she sees the world by enhancing her emotional and intellectual overexcitabilities (Daniels & Piechowski, 2009). She described her experience this way:

I think that the suffering that my mental health has caused has enriched my understanding of the world and just really...Even though I see it through maybe a darker lens, I also see a lot more nuance and beauty in differences and suffering and pain and that's really I think served as almost fuel for me to drive questions and to drive intellectual inquiry because I, in my own life and struggles with mental health, have seen and question things about not just my own life, but in general.

Brie has reached a level of understanding of her twice-exceptional experience that she is able to use representative speech acts (italicized) to describe her identity (Strauss & Feiz, 2014). Brie believes the relationship between her giftedness and mental health caused her to question the status quo of society and ponder how she and others can make the world a better place. Although she is in a STEM major, she feels her twice-exceptionality has enriched her understanding of philosophy, psychology, and public policy when it comes to the area of healthcare. She reflected, "So that's one positive thing, is actually just thinking about that. Like, yeah, I have had suffering in my life because of anxiety and

depression but it also has given me more compassion.” This is very descriptive of what Streznewski (1999) refers to as the “mixed blessing” of being twice exceptional (p 111).

Although most of my participants focused on the negative outcomes from their mental health and giftedness interacting, many of them expressed they felt they were able to look at the world in a different way compared to the general population of their peers. As noted in this section, some of the participants recognized their talents as being deep thinkers as a positive result of their mental health problems and giftedness interacting. Because of this intertwining relationship, some of my participants were able to approach literature, art, and music with creative interest at a young age. Their emotional ability to empathize and connect with distant situations and their intellectual aptitude to entertain various solutions are prime traits of good leaders. However, when there isn’t a health balance between their giftedness and mental health, it is difficult to make progress towards a goal.

Intersectionality of Twice-Exceptionality and Gender: “*You’re not allowed to be an emotional creature, and thankfully girls are encouraged.*” ~Luke

When my final number of participants resulted in 11 women and 2 men, I was not entirely sure what I could glean from my data on the differences and similarities in their twice-exceptional experiences. However, through conducting secondary interviews with some of my participants, I discovered that both genders had ideas about how twice-exceptionality presents itself within men and women. When I inquired about why they thought more women than men came forward to participate in my research, most felt that it was due to the social stigma associated with males being emotional. June describes this sentiment perfectly when she says,

I think when it comes to mental health, girls are honestly a lot more likely to get help for it, because guys are still kind of seen as... They're supposed to be really manly and there's still people who believe men shouldn't cry and stuff like that. So, I think people are more likely to help me out than help men, so I'm kind of I guess privileged in that sense as a woman.

It was interesting to hear the freedom to be emotional, that has been historically viewed as negative behavior in many situations, was perhaps a privileged trait for women when it comes to the twice-exceptional experience.

On the other side of twice-exceptionality, Karrie remembered vividly what it was like to be a gifted female student versus a gifted male student during K-12. If she did not do well on a test or paper,

it was because I failed versus the teacher did something wrong or like the teacher hates me, so I got a bad grade or something like that. So, it seems like for boys, it's a lot more like not blaming themselves because they grew up in a society that's boy-positive.

In her experience, the girls were held to higher standards than the boys. Also, she remembered there was an expectation that boys would excel in mathematics and science and the girls would be more successful in English, education, and communication.

Because of these messages are clear from a young age, Karrie believes that gifted women have more internal pressure to do well in school because it is not expected of them. Boys are praised for doing well in school and the girls are "...more accepting of failure because we think it's about us versus another circumstance." Because boys receive more external praise when they do well, Karrie believed that when her twice-

exceptional male counterparts fail, it is when their mental health problems take root. She said, “So, maybe that takes a toll on them. I mean, I could be wrong. But that maybe they’re...In their mind it’s like, ‘Why is the world against me?’”

According to my participants, the gifted portion of being twice-exceptional is not necessarily the root of embarrassment for men—it’s the emotion that is associated with mental health. Gifted males also feel pressured to be strong and athletic, but within the twice-exceptional focus of my interviews, my participants mainly commented on the emotions of mental health are not considered masculine (Kerr, Vuyk, & Rea, 2012). Being male and gifted did not seem to be much of a shock to teachers and peers in my participants’ experiences. They spoke about how it was more surprising when a female student was labeled as gifted. Although more girls tend to be labeled as gifted from an early age, cultural expectations of the girls being quiet and polite sometimes causes gifted girls to mask their high abilities (Kerr, Vuyk, & Rea, 2012). The negative perception of what it means to be male and what it means to be male with mental health or normal emotions seemed to begin at a young age. Luke, who grew up in a small farming community, describes an atmosphere of “toxic masculinity” when he was in the K-12 educational system. He said in his town, it was clear that,

Men are not weak, we’re not overly emotional. If we have a problem, we deal with it...In fact, it was just in college that I learned that it was okay for a guy to have feelings...Yeah, in my hometown that was not okay. You had to be rough and gruff. You had to like football and monster trucks and you weren’t allowed to enjoy poetry and you weren’t allowed to question the morality of things...you’re not allowed to be an emotional creature, and thankfully girls are encouraged.

Although he was considered an outsider compared to his peers due to his giftedness, a big part of their misunderstanding of him had to do with his passions and his outward sadness. Research indicates that gifted boys and men “often fear that loving art, music, and drama may mean that they are not masculine enough (Kerr & Cohn, 2001; Kerr, Vuyk, & Rea, 2012). Luke enjoys the arts and the emotion that is created from appreciating music and poetry. Additionally, he was known as the “smart kid” and the “sad kid” in his town—which was very counter to what perceptions of masculinity were for that community. Unlike Luke, Zane was able to mask his emotions from his mental health from an early age—he learned this from his father. Zane wondered if it were possible there could be a higher rate of mental illness in males because “...we’re kind of socially encouraged to repress our emotions a lot of the time. This is an issue I’ve talk about before, where I don’t really get angry a lot of the time or show kind of...In general, I don’t show strong emotions.”

Because of the expectation that boys and men will be unemotional, Luke viewed the stereotype of girls and women of being outwardly emotional as a privilege in the twice-exceptional experience. Girls and women may feel more freedom to express their emotions when dealing with mental health as well as open to seeking help. He did acknowledge that there is a problem when women are type-casted into specific roles because of emotion or given the stereotype of being overemotional or hysterical—just like men are type-casted due to their lack of emotion. He expanded,

This gender norming thing is very much an issue, so I think that the issue is that guys aren’t really allowed to be open about their emotions, and me coming from such a place of isolation that I often feel like my understanding of social cues and

norms has been so severely hamstrung by that, that I can just be my own person... 'Cause, I mean certainly, there are young men who you would classify as gifted, but the admitting to there being a mental health component, that is very difficult.

Danielle confirmed Luke's idea about the difficulty for male twice-exceptional students to come forward when she said that she feels society does not let men to be fragile or vulnerable. She said that the men her age are expected to be strong, go to college, and get a job. Although coming forward and identifying herself as a twice-exceptional woman was not easy, she saw it as an opportunity to be heard as not just an emotional woman, but a gifted woman living with mental health. In her opinion, she thought more twice-exceptional college women volunteered to be participants because it was, "...a chance for women to say, 'Hey, I'm here. I'm smart, too, and I deserve this.'"

Brie felt her experience with twice-exceptionality during college has improved since K-12. Because she is a female in a STEM field, she remarked that professors almost find it surprising when she excels in her upper level science courses, especially in Physics:

I think that maybe people are more impressed by you as a female, it's just like, "Wow, you're a female and you're very smart and you're excelling in things like math and science."...people are more impressed like I said, because they don't necessarily expect intelligence in those areas, in math and science. Yeah, so I think it has made it easier as a female and being gifted. Not necessarily with women professors, and maybe that's my own perceptions and it's inaccurate, but I feel like with male professors it's just like, 'Wow, you have the extra edge,'

because they don't necessarily expect that. And not just professors, I guess, but also other male counterparts, male students who are taking these classes with me...So I don't know why people perceive me as being more intelligent than them in that class because I understood just as much as they did, I feel...Maybe because I am female, and I was able to articulate myself...I mean like 'Oh, this is Brie, she's a female, she knows her stuff. This is unique.' Because I'm a female. I don't know. [chuckle]"

She indicated that these shocked reactions from professors were more from her male professors—her female STEM professors did not seem as startled by her performance. Most of her upper-level STEM courses consist of a majority of male students, therefore just being a woman regardless of academic performance is unique in itself. Interestingly, this aligns with what Luke said about twice-exceptional females being privileged—but this time, Brie is privileged with her giftedness and not her ability to express her emotions about her mental health.

While Brie felt she has been taken more seriously when it came to her giftedness in sciences and mathematics with her professors and male counterparts, she found it difficult to relate to other female college students. This is a common struggle for gifted girls and women since other girls and women may reject them because of their particular interests and passions. Many gifted girls and women “long for friends who do not reject them for their greater vocabulary or general knowledge, they need help finding a ‘sure shelter,’ a friend who is advanced intellectually as well as who is at the same social development level” (Gross, 2009; Kerr, Vuyk, & Rea, 2012). Brie recognized the female students in her classes do well, but they do not like to engage in intellectual conversation

with her. Her twice-exceptionality causes her to grapple emotionally with large world issues that her female peers are not always willing to entertain. She is very isolated from other college students, mainly female college students, due to

The fact that I study so much and that I am interested in things other than drinking, and the latest celebrity stuff. I'm talking about this biological mechanism that we learned about in Biochem, or talking about, "Okay, this is what is happening in the world and healthcare." And just really in-depth questions and very intellectual questions. They're not like, "What? This doesn't make sense why..." *It's hard for me to relate to people because—especially females—because they're not as interested in that type of thing.* I'll try to make a comment about what I learned in a somewhat related class, but females will go and, at least from my experience, will go and say, "Oh what in the world is she talking about?" Like, "She's such a snob."

Brie uses an expressive speech act (italicized) in order to describe the emotionality of being misunderstood by her peers (Strauss & Feiz, 2014). Other female participants, along with Brie, indicated that their gifted side of twice-exceptionality was more ostracizing from their peers than their battle with mental health. They live in a world where being an emotional female is a norm, while outwardly showing their intelligence sometimes leads to "othering."

Overall, revealing her mental health issues to some of her professors has not been a problem. On the few occasions where she has discussed her anxiety and depression with professors, they understood what she was going through. She thought that if a male student disclosed their mental health issues to these same professors, she would not be

surprised if the professor would not take the male student seriously, possibly thinking the student is making excuses or is lazy.

Despite female professors not being as impressed by Brie's giftedness in science and mathematics, she said she feels more comfortable discussing her mental health with other women. She found she can better relate to women in academics and some experience some of the same challenges with anxiety and depression. She described her STEM professors as more black and white thinkers, but some of the female professors can see the gray of mental health challenges. Brie echoed the idea of privilege in twice-exceptional females when she said,

I don't necessarily think this is a case that maybe there are less men who have, are twice-exceptional, and have mental health issues. Or at least recognize that they do...it's more likely that there is that cultural standard for men being tough, and women, it's okay if they have issues with emotion and whatever, because females have more emotion and whatever.

Regardless of whether twice-exceptional men and women are willing to be identified with their gifted and mental health struggles, it was apparent from my interviews there is a need for education, resources, and community for these individuals on college campuses.

University Support: *"You put them on a pedestal...but you don't necessarily value them as a whole person."* ~Brie

There is a definite sentiment of wanting to be seen and heard by the university from the twice-exceptional college students I interviewed. There were a variety of suggestions that started at the classroom level. Since most of my participants experienced

some level of anxiety and/or depression, they discussed how their mental health issues were not seen as a real health ailment. Gina described that,

Sometimes people have anxiety attacks before class and can't go to class, and if you don't have a doctor's note, it's non-excused and it's hard 'cause you don't want people to take advantage of it, but then the people who need it, you can't go to the doctor for every anxiety attack...

For instructors, there is a line at which they need to determine whether students are taking advantage of their absence policy. However, the stigma associated with mental illness prevents students from openly speaking about it as a medical experience that is a barrier to their daily routines. Ultimately, some of these students miss class or are not fully present in class because of their mental health and feel they have no way of talking about it in a way that will be perceived as a legitimate health concern.

Participants seemed to agree there needs to be a culture of understanding on college campuses of what mental health is and how it impacts the daily lives of students. Brie expressed,

I think the ability to hear students or just the willingness to hear students out and to care. I think you have to care enough to be able to hear the struggles of students who have mental health issues. So, flexibility, awareness... You need not be a counselor to be a professor but... someone who's saying "Okay, you have anxiety and I can see that, I hear that. I'll, within reason, give you a certain amount of time to finish this or allow you to do it in a certain way."

Unfortunately, when class sizes are larger and more and more tasks are packed into a syllabus, it is understandable why very little attention is placed on the mental welfare of

students. Karrie described her experiences in her large science classes as an “in-and-out factory.” It is a very impersonal experience and she wished there was more of an effort by professors to get to know their students. However, she did not believe it is feasible for professors to build these relationships “...because that requires a lot of energy for professors to get to know every single one of their students when, like I said, I think it is just they’re like incoming students, they’re gonna be leaving in a semester, there’s no point in getting to know each of their life stories ‘cause your job is to teach them, not to get to know them, necessarily.” Very few of my twice-exceptional participants felt comfortable going to a professor for assistance due to the sizeable amount of general population students who appeared to need more assistance. However, even though many of these students are still achieving high grades, they realize their mental health is getting in the way of achieving even more. Anne said she often feels like she is falling behind in her classes despite her good grades. She expressed,

...it’s very important to look at students who are struggling and make sure that they’re doing okay. Make more awareness instead of judging students who are struggling. Ask them how they are doing instead. So I don’t really know how you can incorporate that, but I think oftentimes people just wanna pay attention to the ones who are excelling, because you assume those are the good ones, when a lot of times there’s so much unused potential within people who are just having a hard time that just need an extra push. That’s what I needed.

Consequently, these students are isolated by the fact that they want to ask their professors for help but worry about the judgment they will receive by doing so. Others do not want

to ask for assistance since they identify with being gifted and think they should be able to achieve regardless of their mental illness.

I asked my participants what they would like to see from their professors in the classroom to support twice-exceptional students. A few of the participants said they have always been frustrated by vague assignment descriptions and they appreciate when a professor gives a very detailed outline for what they expect out of a project or paper. They indicated the more specificity in an assignment, the lesser their anxiety levels. My participants also shared how much they dreaded group work in college since so many of them were the key person responsible for successful group projects. Since twice-exceptional students feel a lot of internal and external pressure to excel academically, trying to make an entire group excel at their personal standards for achievement is a daunting task. Danielle wished,

...professors would leave an option to students if they wanted to work in groups or not. I know that doesn't really make sense, 'cause a lot of kids might choose groups just because they're afraid, or might choose alone, just because they're afraid to find a group when in the reality they might wanna work in a group, so I get why, it's a forced thing, but I know a lot of kids with anxiety and mental health issues that just, "I wanna do my work by myself. I wanna be responsible for the grade I get. I don't want your name on it. I don't want you touching my work."

This desired sense of control was also brought up when taking exams. Some of the participants explained their anxiety sometimes takes the form of test anxiety. Frida, a senior accounting major with undiagnosed anxiety, struggled with the freezing effects of

panic attacks during testing. She said it would be helpful if she could have the option of taking exams in a room alone because “seeing people work, or seeing people finish, or things like that just kind of make tests terrible, too. So I think I do better when I’m just taking them in a room, for the same amount of time, but just on my own.” She believed she would do even better in her classes if she did not see her peers finishing before her—she would not feel the internal pressure of comparing her speed and intelligence to the other students in the class.

Outside of the college classroom, some of the participants wanted counseling to be more widely available and less stigmatizing. They said they knew that there was a counseling center on campus, but they never utilized their services. Many of them referenced the Midwestern mentality of helping yourself without asking others to help you. Karrie even said that her doctor wanted her to see a campus counselor, however she remarked, “Have I felt like I’ve had the time or the ability to go? No, I have not. I feel like I’m busy or already stressed out.” Going to a counselor is another item on their already busy to-do list and they would rather focus on excelling in their academics—even if a counselor might help them cope with their mental health. For the few participants who said they have gone to counseling services at their school, it was not consistent and there was a counselor shortage. Sometimes it can be weeks or months before a student can schedule an appointment, which is a long time for a person suffering with mental health to wait. Since most of the counselors at this university are counseling practicum students, the ability to stay with one counselor for an extended amount of time is difficult. At one point during his undergraduate program, Zane could only see a counselor every two to four weeks because of the high demand. He explained that “...after a certain

point I was like ‘I don’t remember where we left off. I don’t even really feel like coming to this anymore, just ‘cause it’s so far and few between, I need to talk to someone more often than this.’” Luke had a similar experience and said that once he builds up trust with one counselor, the semester ends and he has to begin with another person the following semester. He went through four different university counselors during his higher education career and it was exhausting for him to retell his history over and over. In turn, little progress with his mental health coping strategies was made.

The one positive area of university support for my participants was the honors program. They considered the program as a safe space to be twice-exceptional. The class sizes are smaller since the goal is to have an active learning environment that supports intellectual pursuits for gifted students. Because of the smaller classes, students can not only build relationships with each other, but also with the professor—as one participant put it, an honors student is not just another face in a seat. Honors programs give some students an opportunity to be heard and seen by others like them for the first time in their education. Danielle described her experience in honors classrooms:

I feel like a lot of kids who are in the honors program, just when you have conversations in our discussion classes with them, you can tell a lot of them would be labeled as gifted...Like I said, it’s more person-to-person interactions. I got to know a lot of people last year in my freshman honors orientation class...a lot of us went through anxiety or depression or OCD...It seems like we do it to ourselves almost. Like we need to be perfect in school, which is such a big part of our lives, through college or however long we go on, that we push ourselves to anxiety if we’re not performing how well we think we should.

Connecting to other twice-exceptional individuals can be very empowering for these students. Many of my participants were isolated and ostracized by their peers, teachers, and families in their past, so building relationships with those with a similar experience is affirming. Brie felt her isolation from being twice-exceptional lifted when she joined the honors program:

I didn't feel very supported in those ways and I felt alone in the struggle, and I think that through honors, I praise God for honors because I felt like I had a place and that it was okay that I struggled with these things or it was just... There were other people there who understood, maybe had gone through similar things or just had a similar nuanced understanding of the world and life because of pain in their own lives. So that really helped, so I felt that support.

Beyond feeling supported from their honors peers, some of my participants experienced a closer relationship to their honors professors. A few said they connected well enough with their instructors that they felt comfortable openly speaking about their mental health struggles with them. Since the class sizes are smaller, the professors are more readily able to establish trust and approachability with their twice-exceptional students.

Participation in an honors program is only a small portion of a twice-exceptional student's week. They still take the majority of their classes in other departments and they do a lot of living outside of the honors safe space. Overall, there seems to be a general resentment of how universities use their gifted population in order to boost their image to stand out from the rest. Stoller (2017) writes about how the university benefits from recruiting high-achieving students:

Honors might also be viewed simply as a method to incentivize student-consumers attending the university. Here, honors becomes the way in which colleges and universities recruit and retain top candidates, an academic showpiece reduced to the tangible benefits afforded to select candidates at the university. (p. 46)

Although universities should be proud of their high-achieving students, using these students merely as showpieces is not the only level of support these students need. Brie eloquently described what it is like to be a twice-exceptional student within a university system:

...I think that maybe the administration should maybe put more emphasis on understanding the needs... 'cause you put them on a pedestal, you send them to leadership conferences, you put them on billboards. You do all of this, but you don't necessarily... You value them for the statistics that they give you and the face that they give you, but you don't necessarily value them as a whole person who has struggles and who has struggles that stem from the university and how it's structured.

In a culture that is shifting towards more public awareness of mental health, higher educational institutions will have to participate in this transition to meet the needs of their students. If universities want to continue benefiting from their high achieving student population, there will have to be more attention spent on providing appropriate resources and supporting the needs of twice-exceptional students. When universities do not invest in their twice-exceptional student population, the impact on our communities is

unrealized. The lack of attention to the needs of twice-exceptional college students can cause,

immeasurable societal costs: inspiring community leaders who are never elected, cures for diseases that are never discovered, revolutionary inventions that are never patented; thrilling novels that are never written; and ground-breaking theories that are never conceived. (National Education Association, 2006).

If universities and colleges are places to celebrate the cultivation of knowledge and develop students to be high-impact contributors to their communities, it is time for them to develop outlets not only for their below-average and average student population but also their gifted population who may mask their struggles well.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

As mental health awareness becomes more prevalent across college campuses, it is time for universities to pay more attention to the twice-exceptional population. From my participants' stories, twice-exceptional college students clearly mask their mental health struggles well and silently suffer. For the most part, they are active and successful college students. They have high GPAs and actively seek out ways to challenge themselves. But for many of my participants, they are navigating college while being twice-exceptional on their own. They are not always finding help through counseling services, disability services, or even visiting with their professors/staff because they do not believe these services are for high achieving students. Although gifted and talented children are widely understood as a special education group during their K-12 years, gifted children grow up to be gifted college students who continue to need specialized services to succeed and develop.

Honors Programs: A Safe Space

A perfect place for these students to be nurtured is within an honors program/college—they can be places of connection and security. Luckily, the participants in my study were all members of an honors program, therefore receiving support for one half of their twice-exceptionality. However, just because a student may be high-achieving and/or gifted does not mean they are necessarily thrown into an honors program/college once they arrive at their universities. Many of these honors programs require an

application for membership, which does not necessarily capture every student applying for college admission. From my experience in honors education, some prospective students are specifically targeted to apply if they have a certain GPA and/or test score while others have to actively seek out the application form on their own. Stoller (2017) writes,

Honors students often represent the privileged class on our campuses, who are chosen (at least in part) based on their ability to excel relative to normative academic standards.¹ Honors students are (metaphorically and often literally) the 1%. As part of their experience, they receive special sets of services and privileges not available to the wider campus, which is particularly paradoxical on public campuses whose mission is to serve students equally. (p. 45-46)

Honors programs/colleges are still struggling with the perception, and many times the reality, that they are places of elitism and privilege. It is understandable why there are many high achieving and/or gifted students on college campuses who are not in these programs because of being slightly below the GPA or test score requirement, or those who may not be aware that such a thing exists on their college campus—especially first generation students and minority groups (Stoller, 2017).

There are about 900 honors programs/colleges in the United States and are gradually being formed in Europe (National Collegiate Honors Council, 2017; Rinn & Plucker, 2019). According to the National Collegiate Honors Council (2013), honors programs are

...the academic unit on collegiate campus responsible for devising and delivering in-class and extracurricular academic experiences that provide a distinctive

learning environment for selected students. The honors college or program provides opportunities for measurably broader, deeper, and more complex learning-centered and learner-directed experiences for its student than are available elsewhere in the institution... (p. 1)

Although honors education programs are not necessarily completely filled with students who are tested as gifted, these programs tend to attract those who are gifted. Within my experience of teaching and working with honors college students at three institutions, honors programs are usually a haven for those who participate. In many ways, “honors may be one of the few spaces left within the context of mass education where students have the opportunity to experience a transformational education” (Stoller, 2017, p. 46). For many, it is the first time in their life that they feel connected to other students who love to learn and excel as much as they do (Hébert & McBee, 2007). The interdisciplinary nature of the honors classes allows gifted students with multipotentiality to explore. The small seminar classes give them a chance to build close relationships between their peers and professors. Because of the small nature of honors programs/colleges, twice-exceptional students often build enough trust with the faculty and staff to share their experiences and struggles (Brimeyer, Schueths, & Smith, 2014; Fischer, 1996; Morgan & Apple, 2007; Plominski & Burns, 2018; Rinn, 2004; Rinn & Plucker, 2004; Robinson, 1997; Stoller 2017).

Colleges and universities have seen more and more students coming forward and revealing their battles with mental health in recent years (Center for Collegiate Mental Health; 2015). From my own experience attending the National Collegiate Honors Council Conference, every year there seems to be more and more honors staff and faculty

presenting on their own experiences with honors students struggling with mental health. Since honors education has been the home of experimental teaching practices for years, they are perfect places to pilot more intentional programming around mental wellness for students. This could take the form of special events centered around personal awareness of mental health—meditation, yoga, work/life balance, stress and anxiety coping mechanisms, time management, study skills, art therapy, etc. Depending on the campus, there may be opportunities for honors programs/colleges to collaborate with counseling services and/or wellness centers to educate their high achieving students on what a healthy lifestyle looks like.

Holistic Academic Advising

Another element that many honors programs across the country are practicing is a more holistic advising approach (Kem & Navan, 2006). In the fast-paced world of college campuses, taking the time for an advising practice that is more than checking of academic requirements can be difficult—especially when programs and departments are short staffed. As stated before, when gifted students come to campuses, often the attention spent on them is more passive than active. But when advisors and faculty members have this point of view of gifted students, they may not see “...student problems such as overscheduling, underestimating study demands, and misunderstanding program requirements” (Kem & Navan, 2006, p. 26). The time spent getting to know a gifted advisee personally and establish a relationship is well worth the effort. Asking them probing questions like how life is in the residence halls, how they like to relax or unwind, and how they are balancing school, extracurricular activities, friends, and family are all things that can affect their academic experiences during college. It is often during

advisement appointments where students have revealed their mental health struggles and how it is affecting them academically and socially. With a more individualized advising approach, advisors can guide "...the gifted in stress management by developing specific strategies for handling their unique sensitivities" (Kem & Navan, 2006, p. 26). The advisor then can suggest campus resources to help their students with their mental health issues. In my experience with holistic advising, I have directed twice-exceptional students to disability services to work with them on ways to assist with their test anxiety or providing some assignment extensions due to other mental health issues. There have been times where I have helped a student make a counseling appointment or even walked them over to the counseling center immediately when a certain case needed emergency attention. In similar situations, I worked with university housing to do wellness checks on students during the evening hours. Although staffs might be pinched for resources, providing the gift of time and interest with students during advising sessions can help a struggling twice-exceptional student feel less like a number and perhaps even encourage them to use services they thought were not meant for them.

High Demand: More Counselors and Support Groups

Although collaboration is a practice that is highly encouraged between programs and departments on college campuses, as evident in my study, there seems to be a shortage of some of these services—especially when it comes to university counseling centers. Some of my participants, Zane and Luke, shared that they did use their counseling center, however their sessions were few and far between because of the sheer demand for mental health services. These participants desired to go to counseling more often, but it was difficult to make any progress as a result from the distance between appointments.

Another issue, at this particular school, was the turnover of graduate student counselors each semester. It is difficult to establish trust with a practitioner one semester, just to find out that the next semester it will be a new graduate student taking on your case. Although it is great and necessary experience for a counselor-in-training to have, it would be beneficial for universities to invest in a few more full-time professional counselors to take on more serious client cases.

Some of my participants thought it would be beneficial to have support groups and/or workshops on twice-exceptionality either run by the counseling center or in conjunction with the honors program. Even within some of their honor seminar classes, they started to identify with other students in the class who struggle with their mental health daily. Kem and Navan (2006) write, “Collaborative discussions of the constructs and phenomena of giftedness provide gifted college students with a deeper self-understanding and promote feelings of relationship with others who share similar backgrounds and sensitivities” (p. 25). However, as indicated by my interviewees, not everyone is comfortable about being this open about their twice-exceptional experiences primarily due to the cultural messages of hiding their emotions in public. If twice-exceptional workshops or support groups were made readily available and visible, perhaps some of these students would come forward to at least check out how it could benefit them. Along with overt twice-exceptional education, it remains to be very valuable to provide ample opportunities for wellness practices at universities to encourage all-around healthy lifestyles.

Understanding and Support from Administration, Faculty, and Staff

Lastly, there was a strong sentiment from my participants for more understanding from their faculty about mental health. Very few of them felt comfortable expressing

their challenges with anxiety or depression flare-ups in regard to completing their assignments on time, doing group work, and/or taking their tests in a room full of people. They spoke about how mental health still is not considered a typical health issue that you can get a medical note from a doctor to show your professor to explain your absence from class or why you need an extension. Additionally, many of my participants said they would not want to bother their professors for help since they should be able to figure out their academics themselves—there are other students who need assistance from faculty members more than they do.

A path to improvement for faculty and staff would be for universities to provide workshops and/or professional development trainings on mental health and college students. The list of online trainings faculty and staff are required to complete each school year keeps growing, however with the increased conversation surrounding mental health on college campuses, it is a disservice to the student body for there not to be any training at all. At one institution I worked at, there was a new program called *Mental Health First Aid USA (2015)* for any staff or faculty members who were interested in becoming a better resource for their students. It was completely voluntary to participate and participants earned a certification at the end of the training. The course took place over two days and we learned about the leading mental health issues in the United States and the variety of interventions that non-mental health practitioners can provide. We essentially learned how to be first responders for students who have developing depression, anxiety disorders, psychosis, substance abuse disorders, and eating disorders. We also practiced techniques and conversations to have with those students who may have reached a state of mental health crisis. Although we learned a few techniques to

effectively work with students with mental health issues, more importantly, we learned how to be better referrers. I believe one of the main fears about mental health education for professionals who work at universities is that they will have to diagnose and take on more than what they signed up for in their positions. However, students with mental health are not asking for their college mentors to diagnose them; they want mentors to be people of understanding and help them find the resources they need for their health and academic success.

Intersectionality of Twice-Exceptionality and Gender

Although it is fascinating to study twice-exceptional college students as a whole, I did find some interesting patterns when it came to how different genders experience twice-exceptionalism. I knew the particular area of the country I was going to be doing my research in has the stereotype of people “pulling themselves up by their bootstraps” regarding personal struggle and extreme emotions. I was fully expecting this to be more of the sentiment of the men I interviewed (since this mentality is definitely part of a toxic masculinity persona), however most of my female participants echoed this same phrase as something they heard in their homes and communities growing up. Even though some of the female participants grew up with the adage, they indicated they had more freedom when expressing the emotions created by their mental health problems—purely because girls and women do not have the same cultural expectation to be stoic as men and boys do. Many of the female participants, as well as my male participant Luke, said that it is probably be harder for twice-exceptional men to come forward since emotions and mental health struggles are stereotypically seen as weakness and fragility in men. In future research, I would be interested in conducting a study with both male and female

twice-exceptional participants who are not from the Midwest to see if there is any difference in how their mental health problems are expressed and viewed by the region they grew up in.

As indicated from my research, more twice-exceptional women felt comfortable coming forward to speak about living with giftedness and mental health. For many of the female participants, they expressed that the interviews were the first time they felt like their experiences had been heard. This imbalanced gender representation did not surprise me. According to Dinan (2016),

Women outnumber men at most institutions of higher learning, and the percentage of women in honors is usually higher than their overall enrollment percentile. In 2013, the National Collegiate Honors Council gathered data from 890 institutions and found that the percentage of undergraduate females in institutions as a whole averaged 56.6 compared to 64.7 for honors programs and colleges. (p. 295-296)

Because of this imbalanced trend in honors programs/colleges, I suspected that there might be more female twice-exceptional students who would volunteer to participate than male twice-exceptional students. What surprised me was I did not expect to learn as much as I did about the twice-exceptional male experience despite the small number who came forward. I do not believe, and neither did my participants, there are more twice-exceptional women than men; however even though there might not be fewer twice-exceptional men, they are probably least likely to seek support for either their giftedness or mental health issues (Dinan, 2016). According to my participants, there appears to be an underlying cultural element of men not being comfortable coming forward to speak

about their mental health since they still hear messages that it is not masculine to express emotions and/or not being able to fix their own problems.

Of the two participants who identified as male in my study, they were the only two who truly struggled with making good grades in college despite their gifted label. The female participants indicated that they had moments of academic struggle but they still achieved high marks. Many gifted boys grow up to be very successful men, however “there are those who are lost along the way” (Kerr & Cohn, 2001; Kerr, Vuyk, & Rea, 2012; Lubinski & Benbow, 2006). According to past research, gifted boys and men are more likely to underachieve in school to fit in with their other male peers (Kerr & Cohn, 2001). Also, gifted boys and men are more likely to not participate in class discussions or turn in homework when they are bored than gifted girls and women who are bored (Kerr, Vuyk, & Rea, 2012; Matthews & McBee, 2007). Neither Luke nor Zane indicated that they were bored with school, but they revealed that their mental health issues got in the way of their high achievement. Luke, although very intellectually gifted, plans on staying on campus to finish his undergraduate studies within six to seven years, instead of the traditional four. His low periods of mental health episodes had an impact on his grades, which has delayed graduation. Zane’s graduation was not delayed, but he did not achieve the high grades he probably could have received because of his depression and suicidal thoughts. Also, his inability to communicate effectively has followed him into his work life. I would like to further explore whether the world of toxic masculinity has an impact on how twice-exceptional men navigate their academics and future careers.

According to the gendered effects that I found with my participants, I encourage honors programs/colleges to consider some of the trends in gifted men and women when

reviewing their admissions process. If the national trend is for there to be more women enrolling in higher educational institutions, there needs to be some attention given to the men who are not enrolling in college and/or not applying to honors programs. A more inclusive application could be a good place to start. I am currently the assistant director of an honors program at a Big 10 university. Our honors program follows the national trends of having a primarily white and female demographic. In the past year, we changed our application process to include not only GPAs and test scores, but also have applicants fill out an essay about what they are intellectually passionate about and describe some of their high school extracurricular involvement (including after school jobs). We are hoping this new process will yield applicants who are more diverse in terms of gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic background.

Even if honors programs are able to move to a balanced gender population, there needs to be support systems in place for these gifted students. Although honors programs are designed to be places of community support for all honors students, there can be specific needs for female and male gifted students. As explored in my literature review, gifted women tend to struggle more with their academic confidence than gifted men since they often tie their failures to their self-worth. For example, women tend to make lower assessments of their STEM abilities than men do, which leads to more men pursuing the career fields in this category (Dinan, 2016). There is plenty of room in honors programs/colleges to encourage these gifted women to pursue these fields through finding professional mentors, internships, and faculty partnerships to help boost the confidence of these gifted women (Dinan, 2016). The interdisciplinary nature of honors education is a perfect atmosphere to encourage these gifted women to take academic risks

and teach them how not to tie failures to their self-worth. While making space for academic risks, hopefully this will support both sides of being a twice-exceptional woman in college.

On the other hand, twice-exceptional male students might struggle with different areas when entering an honors program/college. For the most part, gifted men, they tend to have more confidence, which may well lead them to take healthy academic risks but can lead them away from seeking support. The result is that young men are often ill-prepared to recognize that they are less likely than their female peers to have the skills necessary to meet the challenges posed by college courses. (Dinan, 2016, p. 299)

Honors programs/colleges should help these gifted male students to have a more realistic grasp how their academics are actually going and introduce them to campus academic resources. As indicated from my interviews with Luke and Zane, both twice-exceptional men struggled with maintaining high grades but did not indicate that the lack of academic achievement was bothering them. For both men, they spoke more about how their twice-exceptionality interfered with how they interacted with outside world than any sort of disappointment with their academic performance. In my work with both male and female twice-exceptional students, they may not want to seek out resources that the general population of students uses because they think these services are not for them. If this is truly the case, it is time for honors programs/colleges to step up and provide some of these resources and programming in-house so perhaps the twice-exceptional population believes these services are for them as well.

Future Directions

Lastly, I am intrigued about what happens to these twice-exceptional individuals after college. In my own experience as being a twice-exceptional woman and having many friends, both male and female, who also have this label, we have been very successful but had our challenges along the way. In studying this after-college age group, I would like to study how their twice-exceptionality affects them when they enter graduate school, the workforce, and even in serious relationships with the potential to raise families of their own. As twice-exceptional individuals age and grow, what are their particular strengths and challenges? And lastly, what kinds of policies and levels of support could be provided for twice-exceptional individuals to continue to thrive and function? Just as there is limited research about twice-exceptionality in college students, there are large gaps in research about how being gifted with mental health affects people throughout their lifetime.

As a twice-exceptional woman, I know there have been a few challenges for me in adulthood. I found my master's program unexpectedly isolating because I felt misunderstood by my peers—mainly because I took graduate school very seriously and felt uncomfortable with the amount of alcohol consumption at social gatherings. Because of these factors, I experienced some passive bullying by a few of my peers. It was during these years that I officially was diagnosed with depression and anxiety. Although I made it to every class and received straight A's, sitting through three-hour classes was excruciating for me with my anxiety. I feared being judged for what I would volunteer in class and that I would become sick in the middle of a lecture. I counted down the days until graduation.

Although my mental health is under better control these days, it spikes its ugly head during times of transition—moving to a new state, starting a new job, trying to make new friends. Like many of my participants, I am able to mask my mental health problems very well in order to be outwardly successful in my career—but inwardly and at home often tells a different story. However, even through adulthood, my twice-exceptionality has caused me to have periods of isolation, depression, and self-doubt. After studying Dabrowski’s theory of positive disintegration, I recognize I have had periods of struggle/disintegration and consequently grew from those experiences (Dabrowski, 1964; Daniels & Piechowski, 2009). And I know that I am not alone in this experience. The twice-exceptional friends I made in undergraduate school still have moments of struggle in their careers, relationships, and parenthood. Like my participant Brie indicated in her interviews, being twice-exceptional can be seen as a gift in the sense that these individuals are often deep and creative thinkers. However, these moments of positive disintegration can be alarming if a person does not know what is happening or does not practice healthy coping mechanisms.

As I continue my career in honors education at the collegiate level, I hope my research findings can have an impact on future initiatives I implement to support my own twice-exceptional students. However, the research on gifted college students with mental health issues is still at the beginning stages and there are many facets yet to explore. I am thrilled to be a contributor to the twice-exceptional literature for an age group who received very little attention in the past. Individuals who are twice-exceptional can walk a lonely road through life since attention to giftedness declines greatly after K-12 education. I am proud to identify with this group of individuals and hope to raise

awareness of their struggles and successes to the greater demographic. The twice-exceptional population deserves more attention to their needs and challenges in order to develop to their full potential and become the next generation of citizen scholars.

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