

# *Internal barriers, personal issues, and decisions faced by gifted and talented females*

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It is obvious that the values of women differ very often from the values which have been made by the other sex. Yet, it is the masculine values that prevail.  
-- Virginia Woolf (1957)

Research with talented females has revealed a number of internal barriers, personal priorities, and decisions that have consistently emerged as the reasons that many either cannot or do not realize their potential. These barriers, priorities, and personal decisions were identified in hundreds of interviews conducted with girls and women at various ages, stages across the life span and in a variety of occupations (Reis, 1998). Of course, not all gifted women experience the same dilemmas and decisions, but commonalities have been found in research on this population. These include dilemmas about abilities and talents, personal decisions about family, decisions about duty and caring (putting the needs of others first) as opposed to nurturing personal, religious, and social issues.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to discuss gifted girls without discussing gifted women because many young gifted girls believe that they can "do it all" or "have it all," while many older gifted females have learned that they cannot.

**It is also important to understand some of these dilemmas cannot be resolved to the satisfaction of everyone involved.**

These personal issues occur across the life span. Some affect the youngest girls in primary grades and some are only apparent to women in their college or graduate school years. What is essential to note is that most of the personal issues discussed in this article are resolved by older talented women studied by Reis (1995). The age of 50 seems to be a key

age for understanding and resolving most of the dilemmas that face many gifted women, although some did find solutions earlier. It is also important to understand that some of these dilemmas cannot be resolved to the satisfaction of everyone involved. Rather, some dilemmas end with changes in a woman's life, such as the maturation of her children and, in some cases, the dissolution of a relationship, the reemergence of other relationships, and a change in environments at work or home.

## **Internal Barriers, Personal Issues, and Decisions**

Consistent trends found in interviews with many young gifted women indicated that they grew up believing that they did not face the barriers that their mothers and

grandmothers encountered (Reis, 1998). As they grew older, many encounter both internal and external barriers (Reis). When and how do women learn about the barriers that affect achievement? Hollinger and Fleming (1984) found no sign of recognition of internal barriers affecting accomplishment in women in 29% of the 284 gifted adolescents they studied. Recent research (Reis) indicated, however, that the conflicts and barriers become more apparent as gifted girls mature and face decisions relating at critical junctures in their lives. In fact, the intersection of these factors--ability, age, career choice, and personal decisions relating to marriage and children--may result in additional internal barriers.

### Can't I Do It All?

In an interview conducted almost 15 years ago, a gifted teenage girl named Maria became angry with questions about perceived barriers she might confront in her future. Maria indicated that she faced no barriers, the women's movement had paved the road, and she could certainly have it all. She explained that her dreams included a road map for her future: an education at a first-rate women's college, a graduate degree, a university position teaching to support her while she wrote the great American novel, a husband,

and children. When Maria was interviewed almost 20 years later, she had finished her undergraduate degree and had fallen in love during college. She had not gone to graduate school, but had financially and emotionally supported her husband, whom she loved deeply, in his pursuit of his career. She spoke about his talents in glowing terms and showed me photographs of their young child who was the joy of her life.

Many talented women feel being ambitious is synonymous with being selfish.

When asked about her plans for graduate school and her writing, she paused and said, "Oh today, I am much more realistic about my goals. I try to get through the week and take care of my family. I also am devoted to my husband's dreams." She explained quietly, "You know, I bought the whole superwoman thing, but it's just not right to put my own needs ahead of the needs of my child and my husband. He has such dreams about his work." Instead, she deferred her own dreams, and only time, perhaps decades, will tell if they will reappear again or simply change.

Young girls often believe they can do anything and everything, and, then, they begin to encounter the subtle messages laden with guilt later

in their life. Many talented women begin to feel that being ambitious is synonymous with being selfish. Even those women who have made it to the pinnacle of their field suffer from decisions about priorities. In an article about elite female Olympic athletes, Martha Ludwig (1996) painted a poignant portrait:

Many female Olympic athletes attempt to juggle the pressures of competition along with a career, a romantic relationship, and parenthood. In spite of the assumed sociological strides made toward equality between women and men in the 1980s and 1990s, high-performance female athletes continue to encounter the obstacles of traditional gender roles. (p. 31)

Ludwig (1996) found that female Olympic athletes report that their spouses often do not provide enough support at home. These women carry the primary responsibility as wife, mother, homemaker, career person, and elite athlete. "Many female athletes face the consequences of identity overload and must struggle to determine the priorities and balance of daily life within a nonsupportive environment. Gender continues to make a difference" (p. 32). Ludwig also found that many of the elite female athletes delay relationships and childbirth rather than shoulder these responsibilities alone.

Some of these personal issues described in this article affect both young girls and older

women. It is difficult to pinpoint exactly when many of these issues surface in younger girls and women, but some research indicates that many of the difficult personal choices and dilemmas facing younger females are resolved as women age (Reis, 1998). With reflection, discussion, supportive friends and partners, and the right environment, younger girls and women can also address and perhaps resolve many of the difficult choices they face. These discussions can be guided by an examination of the critical personal issues they face and personality factors they possess.

### **Gilligan's Concept of a Different Ethic of Caring**

Many talented and gifted girls and women face a difficult, almost unsolvable, dilemma: How to put their own talents first when their entire life had been based upon the importance of relationships and the tacit belief that women always put others first. According to Gilligan (1982), women not only define themselves in a context of human relationships, but judge themselves in terms of their ability to care for others. Historically, women have nurtured, taken care of, and helped their children and spouses. They have developed networks of relationships that are vital to them. Women may be more concerned than men about relationships and

express a greater need for successful relationships. Most of the talented women Reis (1998) studied understood that if they developed their own talents, there would be an impact upon those they loved. They often were frustrated with their own inability to resolve the need to do two things: support, care for, and maintain relationships with those they loved while simultaneously pursuing a talent or a gift to its fullest level. Many only resolved their frustrations about their inability to pursue their own talents at a later age.

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Gilligan (1982) found that a woman's sense of integrity is entwined with an ethic of care, and, for some, this ethic of care is confused with either seeking or needing approval from loved ones. She explained that making the distinction between helping and pleasing frees the activity of taking care from the wish for approval by others. At

that point, responsibility can become a self-chosen anchor of personal integrity and strength.

The ethic of care described by Gilligan, accompanied by women's belief in the importance of relationships, has been found to be the single greatest issue to address for gifted females who also have their own unique dreams and aspirations for important work (Reis, 1998). Many gifted women in their 20s, 30s, and 40s experience guilt over what they want to do for themselves and what they believe they should do for their families and for those they love. Most struggled with finding time to do their own work and often put their work off until they have met all family obligations. As a result, they often had little time left for their own creative work.

As one of the artists studied by Kirschenbaum and Reis (1997) explained that personal work is possible:

when my life is in order, the kids are happy, dinner is cooking, the house is clean, the laundry is caught up, and there's a semblance of calm in the household, it just seems like ideas flow. I can sit down and write poetry just like that. I can sit at the computer and turn out two or three pages of a screenplay.

### **Creation of a Sense of Self and a Feminine Identity**

One of the older gifted women Reis (1998) interviewed was

most eloquent as she explained her search to find herself.

I was never called by my own name until my husband died. As a young girl, I was always Arthur's daughter. When I married, I was Charlie's wife. When I had children, I was Sarah and David's mother. It was only after my children grew up and my husband died, that I was recognized as Berice and called by my own name. I realized I had lost my sense of self as a young girl, and only regained it as an older woman.

Most young girls in elementary and middle school do not have an understanding of self. They begin to learn who they are in high school and college, only to have their sense of self waver as they become involved in a relationship. A sense of self is critical to the development of talent in women. Profound changes in a woman's personal life can alter her sense of self; an early marriage and a resulting name change, for example, may shift or erode her sense of self. If women marry at young ages and have children early in the marriage, they often have little or no time to regain their sense of self, which has shifted. Reis (1998) found that gifted women who marry in their late 20s or early 30s are able to establish a stronger sense of self and are more often able to maintain their understanding of and belief in self than if they marry earlier.

## **The Development of Self-Efficacy**

According to Bandura (1986), self-efficacy is a person's judgment about his or her ability to perform a particular activity. He found a positive relationship between self-efficacy beliefs and academic performance. Sources for increasing self-efficacy include past performances, the vicarious experiences of observing models who are like yourself, verbal persuasion, and physiological clues (Bandura).

Many women with multipotentiality find decision making difficult since it is not possible to do all they would like to do and are capable of doing.

Because of the external and internal barriers they confront in life, many gifted females do not have the opportunities to develop self-efficacy. They receive less verbal persuasion from their parents and friends, observe fewer role models, and produce less creative work.

## **Multipotentiality**

Women who demonstrate multipotentiality usually have an eagerness to learn and a thirst for knowledge (Ehrlich, 1982); receive uniformly high scores across ability and achievement tests (Sanborn, 1979); are involved in multiple

educational, vocational, and leisure interests at comparable intensities; and have complex personality factors. Women with high potential and multiple interests often have multiple academic, career, and leisure possibilities, and these choices constitute multipotentiality. For some, having many choices is beneficial because they result in a variety of options. Others, however, often can not find their niche, make it on their own, or choose a vocational path (Fredrickson, 1979, 1986; Jepsen, 1979; Kerr, 1981; Marshall, 1981; Sanborn; Schroer & Dorn, 1986). Many women with multipotentiality find decision making difficult since it is not possible to do all that they would like to do and are capable of doing.

Personal factors may also affect girls and women who demonstrate multipotentiality. Perrone and Van Den Heuvel (1981) found that multipotentiality may lead students to commit to a career too quickly in order to reduce tensions caused by a vast array of competing options. Other multipotential women may have career choices externally imposed on them by their parents or teachers who believe they know the appropriate field (Silverman, 1993). Still others may simply become engrossed in a single subject area at a very early age and waver little from this choice, deliberately closing doors to many unexplored

possibilities in order to eliminate the likelihood of any unwanted confusion (Marshall, 1981; Silverman). A connection between personality attributes and the "overchoice syndrome" seems to exist (Clark, 1992; Schmitz & Galbraith, 1985). The areas of self-exploration, self-criticism, intellectual maturity, and the presence of complex value systems all interact with multipotentiality. Women with a wide range of personality characteristics and perspectives often have a difficult time understanding themselves and making appropriate choices for career and advanced training.

### **The Development of Resilience**

Theories about resilience attempt to explain achievement among those who are subjected to negative psychological and environmental situations. Rutter (1987) defined resilience as "the positive pole of individual differences in people's response to stress and adversity" (p. 316). The gifted women Reis (1998) studied used successful resilience strategies and achieved while others of similar ability who faced similar problems did not. These gifted artists, scientists, authors, politicians, activists, and scholars took control of their own learning. Determination, insight, independence, initiative,

humor, and creativity characterized their lives. A famous female composer in a study of older talented women explained that music appreciation and music history books were filled with male composers and it was time for more females to enter those pages (Reis, 1995).

Several factors contributed to the development of resilience. Strong family and relationship ties, friendships with other women and men, love of work, and a passion to continue doing what they love were all attributes of the resilient, gifted females (Reis, 1998). Likewise, the realization that defeat sometimes provided an opportunity for learning to occur also contributed to developing resilience.

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A prominent college president, explained that faculty, students, and the press constantly criticized her. She indicated that she understood that this criticism was a "part of the territory" when she accepted the position. She expected criticism and

regarded it as the predecessor to positive action (Reis).

### **Fear of Success or Fear of Not Finding a Partner Who Celebrates Your Success**

Some researchers believe fear of success syndrome, first introduced by Horner in 1970, is a key factor in understanding the problems facing gifted women. Fear of success may cause some females to believe that they will be rejected by their peers or appear undesirable to the opposite sex if they are too competent or successful. Horner explained that many capable young women change their plans to accommodate a less ambitious, more traditionally feminine role, away from role innovation.

Sassen (1980) reexamined success anxiety in women, finding that the climate of competition may result in anxiety instead of success for some women. She suggested that this anxiety might be a reflection of an essentially female way of constructing reality and called for a way to restructure society and institutions so that competition is not the only avenue to success. However, Reis' research with women in their late 20s, 30s, and older indicates that these women do not fear success, but often regard it with some ambivalence. This ambivalence occurs not because they fear rejection from either peers or

individuals in whom they may have a romantic interest, but rather because they don't desire the trappings which may accompany success. These trappings include overexposure in a too public life, an inability to balance success with time for family and other loved ones, an overt dislike of the perceived competition that may be necessary to achieve success, and a strong dislike of the types of behavior that may become necessary to maintain success.

Some ambivalence about success may affect women at all levels of accomplishment, from the most eminent to those who are beginning their rise to success. Even female Olympic contenders experience fear of success. In a study of Olympians, Ludwig (1996) found fear of both success and failure, indicating fear of failure is manifested in a similar manner by both men and women, but that fear of success is primarily a female issue. "Fear of success for women seems to initiate from a cognitive belief system that sometimes becomes an insurmountable obstacle to success" (p. 31).

Fear of success at an early age, however, may lead to a change in confidence in one's ability and can have devastating effects if it occurs during college or graduate school. Results in a study of high school valedictorians by Arnold

(1995) found that female students who had done well in high school lose confidence in their ability after a few years of college. In their second year of college, the female valedictorians lowered their assessments of their intelligence. The effects of this loss of self-confidence can influence the rest of a young woman's life if it causes changes in college plans, goals for graduate study, or choice of partner or career. Arnold's conclusions suggest gender differences in intellectual self-esteem of talented females who realize that their career decisions will interact, perhaps negatively, with both their relationships and motherhood.

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### **Absence of Planning or Poor Planning**

Another issue affecting young talented females is their inability to plan for the future in a realistic way. Many young women ignore or are unaware

of the economic reality that most will have to work their entire lives to support themselves, their families, or both. Males, on the other hand, grow up realizing that they will have to work for a lifetime and select more appropriate long-range career goals.

Because some women do not learn to plan, they often have not thought about how they might juggle a marriage, career, family, graduate school, and advanced study. Some talented girls had unrealistic beliefs that they can go through college and graduate school, begin a career, and then interrupt that career to marry and have children without consequence to their career choices and professional advancement (Reis, 1998). Parents and teachers must consider planning as a way of working with young gifted females to help them establish clear goals that will guide them if they should become involved in a relationship and consider deferring their own dreams. Talented young women have to learn that planning for themselves is essential and not a selfish act. In 1891, Gilman wrote about planning in *Women and Economics*, "Where young boys plan for what they will achieve and attain, young women plan for whom they will achieve and attain" (p. 18). Planning for one's education and personal dreams can provide the tools necessary to enable talented girls and women to have

choices, as well as to understand the ramifications of decisions to discontinue an education or change a career plan because of a relationship.

### **Hiding Abilities, Doubting Abilities, and Feeling Different**

Buescher and his associates (1987) studied gifted adolescent boys and girls and found that while 15% of boys hide their ability in school, 65% of girls consistently hide their talents. Reis (1998) found that gifted girls do not want to be considered different from their friends and same-age peers. Indeed, a tendency exists for many females, regardless of age, to try to minimize their differences. For many gifted girls, however, the problem becomes more difficult as they become women and their talents and gifts set them apart from their peers and friends. If the school environment is one in which academics take a back seat to athletics or other activities, the issue may be exacerbated. Learning why females mask or hide their ability is often critical to addressing the problem, and finding environments in which success is celebrated and individual differences are respected is crucial.

In addition to hiding abilities, some gifted and talented women begin to doubt that they really have abilities. In a study about female graduates

who attended a school for gifted students in New York City from 1920 through the 1970s (Walker, Reis, & Leonard, 1992), three out of four women did not believe in their superior intelligence. If women do not recognize their potential, they usually will not fulfill it. In this study, these gifted women selected mediocre and gender stereotypic jobs, often due to pressure from parents and teachers.

**Sixty five percent of girls consistently hide their talents.**

**If women do not recognize their own potential, they usually will not fulfill it.<sup>1</sup>**

It is difficult to live in a community when you either feel or are different. Wanting to create or spend large blocks of time doing one's work, instead of doing more gender acceptable tasks such as spending time with friends, and being involved in community service, often sets older talented women apart. These women report they are constantly asked why they can't be happy with their life. A congresswoman in a study of older eminent women indicated her female friends asked her in

amazement each time she ran for re-election, "Why do you do this to yourself?" (Reis, 1998). An unfortunate by-product of a creative productive life is the reality of few friendships. Many talented women have indicated that they did not have enough time for friends (Reis). At age 50 and over, as other relationships ended and children grew up and moved out, some patterns of friendship were renewed and the feelings of separation, for some women, diminished. But the feelings of being different seldom left these women.

### **The Impostor Syndrome**

A related issue occurs when females achieve high levels of success--labeled by Clance and Imes (1978; Clance, 1985) as the great impostor syndrome. This syndrome describes a low sense of self-esteem that occurs when females attribute their successes to factors other than their own efforts and see their outward image of a bright successful achiever as being undeserved or accidental.

- *"I was lucky"*
- *"I was in the right place at the right time"*
- *"I really didn't do as well as it seems"*
- *"I had a lot of help"*

are all statements made by talented females complemented on their successes. This reaction to compliments and success does

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<sup>1</sup> Boxed text are quotations from the article. Many have been edited for emphasis..

not seem to affect males to the same degree.

Females tend to attribute their successes to effort or external factors, such as luck, while failures are explained as internal faults or as due to lacking certain abilities. On the other hand, males attribute their success to their own capabilities and failure to external factors. Attribution theory indicates that the masculine attribution pattern is more likely to provide a greater motivation for performance than the feminine pattern. Weiner (1986) found that attributions can influence emotions, self-concepts, and subsequent behaviors.

In a research study conducted with high school valedictorians, Arnold (1995) found that by the second year of college, over a quarter of the high school valedictorians she studied had lowered their self-rankings of their intelligence, indicating that they were merely average in intelligence. This phenomenon did not occur with the male valedictorians whose self-rankings remained consistent or actually improved. The women Arnold studied continued this pattern at graduation from college. None of the women placed herself in the highest category of intelligence while men, in sharp contrast, steadily increased their self-ratings (p. 106).

Some talented women actually begin to believe that they

accomplished success because they fooled other people, or were successful due to having the right mentor, a happy disposition, or an act of chance. In some cases, this feeling of accomplishing success due to luck or chance has occurred because talented girls and women can often accomplish a great deal without the effort which is often required from their less capable peers. If ability is high and less effort is warranted, many women begin to feel that they are lucky rather than academically gifted.

Self-reflection, discussion, and time are often necessary to overcome the great imposter syndrome. Supportive environments, counseling, and peer support are also important for understanding that success is attained in different ways.

Talented girls and women frequently accomplish a great deal without the effort required from less capable peers. When less effort is warranted, many women feel they are lucky rather than gifted.

### **Confusion About Effort and Ability**

Linked to the great imposter syndrome is the difficulty experienced by many talented

women in understanding the complex relationship between effort and ability. Most people believe that effort and ability are the reasons that they achieve or underachieve in school and life. According to attribution theory (Weiner, 1986), effort and ability are both internally perceived causes, and understanding the relationship between them is important. Many high-achieving students tend to attribute their successes to a combination of ability and effort and their failures to lack of effort. On the other hand, individuals who accept their own failure often attribute their successes to external factors, such as luck, and their failures to lack of ability. Before the age of 10, children are usually unable to distinguish effort from ability. However, as they approach adolescence, they begin making a distinction, and gender differences emerge. Boys more often attribute their successes to ability and their failures to lack of effort, while girls often attribute their successes to luck or effort and their failures to lack of ability. The academic self-efficacy of young males is enhanced based on their belief in their ability. It is maintained during failures because of the young male's attribution of failure to lack of effort. The same does not appear to be true for young females. Girls may accept responsibility for failure, but not for success. Researchers

believe that although girls may perceive themselves to be bright, they interpret any failure quite negatively, believing that it is caused by lack of ability (Dweck, 1986).

Developing a strong belief in one's ability in the elementary and middle school years is important because "by the end of elementary school, children's [perceptions] ... of ability begin to exert an influence on achievement processes independent of any objective measures of ability" (Meece, Blumenfeld, & Hoyle, 1988, p. 521). Many gifted adolescent girls believe that possessing high ability means that they will achieve excellent grades without effort. Students often believe that if they must work hard, they lack ability (Dweck, 1986). During adolescence, talented girls may move from self-confidence to self-consciousness and often have doubts about their ability (Reis, 1998).

Teachers contribute to confusion about effort and ability. As early as first grade, teachers tend to "attribute causation of boys' successes and failures to ability and girls' successes and failures to effort" (Fennema, Peterson, Carpenter, & Lubinski, 1990). Teachers also contribute to confusion by stressing the time assigned for tasks or tests. Girls, all too often, learn that being fast equals being smart. This time pressure may be discouraging to girls who are

often more reflective and may take longer to think than boys of similar intellectual potential.

Researchers have found that teachers' feedback about work is a better predictor for children's self-perceptions of their ability and effort than are other types of interactions with teachers or with peers (Pintrich & Blumenfeld, 1985, p. 654). Seigle and Reis (1998) found that teachers still rate adolescent gifted females higher than gifted males on effort.

Schunk (1984) found that children who initially receive feedback complimenting their ability, rather than feedback complimenting their effort, developed higher ability attribution, self-efficacy, and skills. This finding clearly indicates that parents and teachers should praise girls for their ability, thereby helping them come to understand that they have ability.

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It is essential that young gifts learn early about effort and understand that the most talented people expend a great

deal of effort to be successful at challenging pursuits.

## Searching for Perfection

Perfectionism may be regarded as both a positive and negative influence in one's life. Hamachek (1978) viewed perfectionism as a manner of thinking about behavior and described two different types of perfectionism, normal and neurotic that form a continuum of perfectionist behaviors. Normal perfectionists derive pleasure from the labors of effort and feel free to be less precise as the situation permits. Neurotic perfectionists are unable to feel satisfaction because they never seem to do things well enough. Hamachek identified six specific overlapping behaviors describing both normal and neurotic perfectionists: depression, a nagging feeling of "I should," shame and guilt feelings, face-saving behavior, shyness and procrastination, and self-deprecation.

**Too many talented females spend their lives trying to be perfect.** In addition to investing considerable energy in trying to be the best athlete, the best dancer, the best scholar, the best friend, and the best daughter, young gifts and women often feel that they must also be slender, beautiful, and popular. This perfectionism is often a result of parental pressures, as well as pressures from the media, and a conscious or unconscious

desire to try to make everyone happy. A perfectionism complex can cause talented women to set unreasonable goals for themselves and strive to achieve at increasingly higher levels. It also can cause women to strive to achieve impossible goals and spend their lives trying to achieve perfection in work, home, body, children, and other areas.

In a recent study on perfectionism in gifted adolescents in a middle school, Schuler (1997) found that perfectionism can be viewed as a continuum with behaviors ranging from healthy/normal to unhealthy/dysfunctional. Order and organization, support systems, and personal effort were the factors that impacted the healthy perfectionists. All of the healthy female perfectionists had been aware of their perfectionist tendencies since they were young, with their first memories related to school activities. While this need for order was pervasive among these gifted girls, they felt supported by their families, friends, and peers. They received encouragement to do their "personal best" academically, told that mistakes were acceptable parts of learning. Their teachers considered the healthy female perfectionists responsible, cooperative, organized, considerate, and conscientious workers. On the other hand, concern over mistakes, perceived parental

expectations, and perceived parental criticisms were the salient factors for the gifted unhealthy/dysfunctional female perfectionists. They possessed a fixation about making mistakes that resulted in a high state of anxiety. Their definitions of perfectionism focused on not making any errors.

**The majority of the unhealthy female perfectionists worked to please others** — teachers, peers, or parents. Unlike the healthy female perfectionists, they viewed their parents' perfectionism negatively, and perceived parental expectations as demands to be perfect in everything they did. Comments such as, "don't fail," "do the best," "where are the A's?," and "you should do better" were not interpreted as motivators, but as criticisms of their efforts, leading them to be highly critical of themselves and possess an intense concern over making mistakes.

**A perfectionism complex can lead talented women to strive to achieve impossible goals and spend their lives trying to achieve perfection in work, home, body, children.**

The unhealthy female perfectionists were critical of themselves and of those whom they wanted to impress,

especially a parent or other perfectionist peer. Their own inappropriate expectations, added to the pressure these girls faced. The consequences for the pressure were self-doubts, procrastination, repeating work over and over, taking an exceedingly long time to complete tasks, and constant anxiety and worry.

### **Different Messages From Home and School**

Many young girls have problems reconciling messages that have emerged from different environments. For example, if a teacher tells a girl to speak out in class, raise questions, and be assertive in pursuing her talents, this teacher's message may directly conflict with what this girl has been told at home. Parents often have strict guidelines about manners for their daughters at home such as not being too aggressive and acting like a young lady. However, looking cute, minding their manners, and being polite and ladylike may conflict with characteristics necessary for girls with high potential to evolve into successful women who make a difference. In order to evolve into successful women, smart girls need to challenge convention, question authority, and speak out about things that need change. The very characteristics found to be associated with older talented women (determination, commitment, assertiveness,

and the ability to control their own lives) directly conflict with what some parents encourage as good and appropriate manners in their daughters (Reis, 1998). The manners taught to some daughters and sons are, of course, influenced by the cultures in which we live. While not wanting to eliminate what is unique to each diverse culture, a discussion of some of the issues related to strict implementation of a code of manners and behavior for girls, as well as boys, is warranted.

Dabrowski (1967) is one of the few theorists whose personality theories have been applied to gifted individuals. Dabrowski believed that some people display supersensitivities or overexcitabilities in several areas: psychomotor (increased levels of physical activities), intellectual (increased levels of intellectual activities), sensual (expanded awareness), imaginal (high levels of imagination), and emotional (intensified emotions). Talented young girls may experience some of these overexcitabilities and often, in Reis' experience, have expanded awareness in the sensual, imaginal, and emotional areas. Too strict a behavior code may directly conflict with their emotional nature and could be difficult for parents to enforce and for children to obey. Parents who demand a certain behavior code at all times sometimes squelch the passion and the

love of questioning and talking from their outgoing, spirited daughters. Parents and teachers should try to channel the overexcitability, determination, willfulness, or stubbornness they find in gifted girls to something positive, such as social action, improving some aspect of life, sports, hobbies, music lessons, or any personal interest area.

### **Unreal Expectations of Future Careers or Part-Time Work for a Full-Time Future**

Some young girls want to be doctors, lawyers, or scientists when they grow up, but don't know how to plan to achieve these goals. They may have no idea about the time commitment or the requirements involved in these careers.

#### **The characteristics developed by older talented women**

- **determination,**
- **commitment,**
- **assertiveness, and**
- **control of their own lives...**

**directly conflict with what some parents encourage as good and appropriate in their daughters.**

Many have not considered how they will integrate personal

relationships with this process, and, if they fall in love, few are prepared to make decisions to enable them to have both challenging careers and satisfying personal lives. Instead, they often put the interests of the person they love ahead of their own interests.

Many talented young women lower their aspirations, choosing less demanding careers that they believe will enable them to marry or be involved in a committed relationship. Many leave work to raise their children and plan to re-enter the workforce at a later time. To this end, they may choose not to pursue careers in math or science or they may decide to postpone their completion of advanced degrees in a professional career. Instead, they may select a more traditional female service career, such as teaching, medical technicians, secretarial, or childcare that they believe will enable them to leave and return to work when their children are older.

In the study of high school valedictorians cited earlier, Arnold (1995) found that the highest-aspiring women differed from their peers in their expectation in that they would have continuous careers. Aspirations for top careers, professionally related experience, and mother's education characterized the females who planned to pursue the most challenging careers.

These women with higher career aspirations also planned more continuous labor force participation, as well as later marriage and childbearing than their female peers. At the age of 31, three-quarters of the women who had held the highest aspirations were found to be working at the highest levels. This group included physicians, attorneys, professors, scientists, and business executives. Another group included women in middle-ranked occupations such as nursing, physical therapy, and pre-college teaching. The third group of women were working in nonprofessional jobs that did not require a college degree or raising their children full-time (pp. 116-117).

Many women take time off from their careers during their mid-20s to mid-30s to raise children, and unfortunately, this time is precisely when most careers escalate. It is possible, in some careers, to take time away to raise a family. It is impossible in other careers, however, and this reality results in one of the most difficult decisions facing women. The 10 years between age 25 and 35 has also been found to be the strongest predictor of lifetime earnings. As more women pursue these various future directions, businesses and institutions should continue to develop new suggestions and strategies for promoting female success.

### **Self-Doubt, Self-Criticism, and Comparisons**

From the earliest ages, as young as primary grades, girls have been found to lack confidence when compared to boys of the same age. Bardwick (1972) found that girls who were as young as 6-8 lacked confidence and expected to fail when compared to boys of the same age who expected to achieve.

It is not possible in some careers to take time away to raise a family; this reality results in one of the most difficult decisions facing women.

*Shortchanging Girls, Shortchanging America*, a study commissioned by the American Association of University Women (AAUW, 1991), included a poll of 3,000 students in grades 4-10, which found that as girls get older, their self-esteem drops dramatically. Enthusiastic and assertive at ages 8 and 9, they begin to lose confidence in their abilities at ages 13 and 14 and emerge from high school with measurably lowered goals. The same study indicated that the decrease in girls' self-esteem is three times greater than boys.

Arnold's (1995) study showed that as female valedictorians got older, they lowered their self-rankings and seemed to

have more doubts about their own abilities, despite receiving higher grades throughout college. She cited Meredith, a Phi Beta Kappa graduate in mathematics and music, as being deeply insecure about applying to graduate school: "I thought no one wanted me" (p. 107). Reis (1998) found insecurities in talented females parallel at almost every age level, as they express more doubt about their abilities, compare themselves more, and criticize themselves and others more. Unfortunately, this critical nature often extends to withholding support from other women.

Even the most talented women worry about criticism and sometimes doubt their ability and work. Maria Goeppert Mayer had to be pushed to publish her work. She was reluctant to present a detailed account of her ideas to the scientific community at large, fearing that her ideas were not original (Gabor, 1995, p. 144). She published a brief explanatory letter about her findings in *Physical Review* and only later submitted lengthy articles about her discovery of the shell model for which she later won the Nobel Prize.

Several different researchers have found that a lack of confidence in girls seems to increase with females who are more intelligent, and this pattern may continue into mid-life. The roots of the problem

are deep and complex. Charmaine Gilbreath, a rocket scientist at the Naval Research Laboratory in Washington, D.C., heads the electro-optics technology section. Her work involves shooting laser beams at rocket plumes to study reflected light and learn how particles in rocket fuel react with the atmosphere. After completing her first college degree in communications and humanities and deciding to become a lawyer, she changed her plans, deciding she liked physics and geometry. She recalled:

It took me two years to get up the nerve to take a pre-calculus class. I was surprised that it wasn't that hard. I aced it. Then I took physics and calculus courses, and they weren't all that hard either. That's when I first realized I'd been buffaloed. (Cole, 1994, pp. 58-9)

When she returned to school to get her degree in physics and engineering, she found her biggest obstacle was her own lack of self-confidence: "Girls think they have to always get As. If a girl gets a B or C, she thinks she can't do it. But boys get Bs and Cs and go on to be scientists and engineers" (Cole, 1994, pp. 58-9). Explaining the success of some of the current crop of female scientists, Gilbreath, who completed her Ph.D. at Johns Hopkins, explained:

I had to put psychological blinders on, and not listen to the external stuff, because before, the external stuff had been wrong for me.

Those of us who made it are those who learned to ignore society's traditional expectations of women. (Cole, 1994, p. 59)

Numerous studies have documented the difference in self-confidence between men and women relative to achievement (Erkut, 1983; Gold, Brush, & Sprotzer, 1980; Vollmer, 1986). In addition to having less confidence in their own abilities, the talented girls were overly critical of themselves and listened more to advice given by others, took it more to heart, and often followed it.

...women look to others for evidence of their competence more than men do and are more sensitive to the evaluations they receive from others...  
Research has also found women take criticism much more seriously.

Roberts (1991) found that women look to others for evidence of their competence more than men do and are more sensitive to the evaluations they receive from others (Roberts & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1994). Research has also found that women take criticism much more seriously. Roberts and Nolen-Hoeksema believe that women are more influenced by the

evaluations they receive than men, perhaps because of differing perceptions of the informative value of those evaluations.

If a guidance counselor tells a young girl that an advanced math class will be too hard, she may not take the math class. If parents tell their daughter that medical school is beyond her capabilities, she may believe them.

Miller (1976) found that the women she saw in her practice were pre-occupied with how their actions affected others, questions about connecting and giving, and whether they were perceived as being selfish or measuring up. Her female patients' problems ranged from anger that they did not have the time to pursue their dreams to those who reached their goals but were lacking in personal connections and relationships and believed that they were missing something essential in their lives (Miller).

Many of the gifted females also wondered aloud if their success had been gained through compromising what they have done for others (Reis, 1998). Why do so many women feel guilty, selfish, or both about pursuing their own talents? Why, even when they have been successful, are they plagued with guilt and concerns about the impact of their success on those they love? Perhaps the answer lies in what they have been taught as children, or perhaps it lies

in what seems to be fundamentally important to women--that is, the relationships in their lives. The importance of relationships may explain the happiness of the many women who have had to give up some of their career dreams or professional aspirations and instead created a happy and fulfilling personal life, rich in relations. Again, however, the paradox emerges as Reis also interviewed gifted females who look back with deep regret on dreams left unfulfilled. These women often had a sense of destiny and a need to find appropriate work in order to feel that their lives have somehow made a difference. At the same time, they also seem to realize that work without relationships leaves a woman unhappy in her personal life.

### Religious Training

*Men are superior to Women.*

--The Koran

*Blessed are thou, O Lord our God and King of the Universe, that didst not create me a woman.*

— Daily Prayer of the Orthodox Male Jew

*To the women he said, I will greatly multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband and he shall rule over you.*

—Genesis 3:16

Many talented women who have firm religious backgrounds and beliefs have grappled with the religious training they received as young children (Reis, 1998). This religious training may conflict with what is required if they are to develop their own talents. Selflessness, modesty, turning the other cheek, and the subjugation of individual pursuits for the good of others are lessons some women learn from their earliest interaction with religious training, and these lessons may conflict with experiences that occur later in life.

Some of the reasons that many talented women have few friends and are often lonely revolve around the extremely limited amount of time they have for friendships and the ambivalence of other women to talented women who achieve at high levels.

Concerns about pursuing one's talents being misconstrued as "selfish consideration" have been mentioned repeatedly by many of the gifted women studied who had religious training throughout their childhood and adolescence. Many still struggle with learned beliefs that to pursue their own talents is selfish.

Guilt seems intertwined with many women's struggles to understand the relationship between their own talent development and what they learned in their religious training about their responsibilities to those they love. The guilt they feel, perhaps, explains why selecting work that results in social change or the improvement of the human condition is so important to some talented women with strong religious backgrounds.

### Loneliness Experienced by Talented Women

In many of the interviews conducted with both older and younger gifted females, they described their feelings of loneliness and betrayal by other women (Reis, 1998). When asked about friendships, a successful college president replied simply, "I have none." Some of the reasons that many talented women have few friends and are often lonely revolve around the extremely limited amount of time they have for friendships and the ambivalence of other women to talented women who achieve at high levels. Successful women recounted situations in which their success was viewed negatively by both other women and men. Women who had successful careers often reported that they were pitted against women who stayed at home and worked to raise their families.

Some talented women who achieved eminence recounted situations in which other women actually seemed to look for specific examples of deficiencies in their talented counterparts. "She actually said to me, 'Well, of course you earned a law degree, but your marriage fell apart,'" confided one woman, describing her best friend's comment after her painful divorce from her husband who had been having an extramarital relationship. Many talented women consciously hide their accomplishments from friends and families and often seem to feel guilty about being able to accomplish a great deal. Several described the ways in which their friends consistently drew comparisons. "I don't know how you do it, I certainly can't," "How do you get so much done?" and "Look at what you have accomplished as compared to what I have accomplished" are frequent comments made to talented women by their peers and friends. These remarks seem to imply that there is one secret to being successful, rather than what has contributed to achievement in most gifted women--hours of sacrifice, time spent on work instead of other areas, and choices, often painfully made, about what to give up so that one's work can be completed (Reis, 1998).

Many women need and look for support from females and male peers and instead find

comparisons, hostility, and a continued absence of friendship. Some women do not extend support to other women and, in turn, rarely find the support they need for their own individual choices.

Talented females need to establish a network of support and encouragement from their parents, siblings, and friends. They need someone to be proud of their efforts and the results of their work. Without this support, they will continue to be lonely and isolated.

### **Physical Attractiveness**

In a recent interview, former Congresswoman Pat Schroeder remembered her frustrations with how difficult it was to find a position as an attorney after graduating from Harvard Law School in 1964. She could not secure a single interview with a Denver law firm.

**Many talented women consciously hide their accomplishments and often seem to feel guilty about being able to accomplish a great deal.**

The Denver firms were interested in her husband who also had a law degree, but not in her. She also reported that the Harvard placement office which, at that time, took for granted the masculine marketplace, did not help her either. Schroeder remembered

the placement officer telling women to look ugly, to roll their nylons down around their ankles, and to look dowdy, as an attractive woman would be a detriment in law offices, but an unattractive woman could be stuck in a back room taking care of research files.

Clearly, times have changed, but some physically attractive gifted females report their most challenging conflicts have been about personal issues and choices (Reis, 1998). Teenage girls who are considered attractive are sought after by young males, increasing the likelihood that they will have more decisions to make about relationships and, perhaps, more options to marry younger. They are also more sought after for friendships by other females. Girls who are considered less attractive by their male and female peers may have more time to pursue their own choices and can devote more attention to their academic work without facing some of the difficult issues about relationships. In research with high school and middle school girls, other students pressured those who were considered attractive for dates, attention and relationships with both male and female peers. They had little time for introspection about what is important in life (Reis & Diaz, 1999).

In research with gifted teenage girls some very attractive young women invented

boyfriends to give them an excuse not to date, allowing them more time to pursue their work in school and their own interests. Gifted young women from Puerto Rican or other Latina groups reported that inventing boyfriends enabled them to achieve while being able to exist within their culture, a culture in which relationships are crucial. Rosa, one of the young women in a study of high school gifted girls, did not date at all until her junior year of high school and then she invented a boyfriend who was away at college, explaining that for a talented Puerto Rican female to date would mean she would have to put her hopes and dreams on hold and pay attention to her boyfriend: "It's not that I'm not interested. It's just that I see myself doing my thing first. Males always have to be first in a relationship. And, sometimes, they don't like that you're smart" (Reis, Hebert, Diaz, Maxfield, & Ratley, 1995).

While beauty has long been considered a positive attribute in the psychological literature, Heilman and Stopeck (1985a) found that it can be detrimental for women in the corporate world. In one study using 113 randomly selected men and women, participants were asked to review career descriptions and photographs of fictitious important corporate executives. While attractive male business executives were perceived as

having more integrity than unattractive men, attractive females were considered to have less integrity than unattractive ones. Attractive male executives were believed to have ability and effort directly related to their success, while the success of attractive females was attributed directly to luck, not ability.

Heilman and Stopeck also found that all unattractive female executives were believed to have more integrity and to be more capable than attractive female executives.

In research with gifted teenage girls, some very attractive young women invented boyfriends to give them an excuse not to date, allowing them more time to pursue their work in school and their own interests.

In another study, the same research team found that attractiveness was advantageous for women in nonmanagerial positions and disadvantageous for women in managerial positions. Physical attractiveness had no effect whatsoever on males in the same types of positions (Heilman & Stopeck, 1985b).

Talented females who were considered by their peers to be the most attractive had the most options to choose from

about the future and were the most ambivalent about their own talent development. If they began to date, they deflected attention from their studies and their belief in self. Those who were less attractive had more freedom to be studious and to continue with their academic plans (Reis, 1998).

Holland and Eisenhart (1990), authors of *Educated in Romance: Women, Achievement, and College Culture*, found similar results in their study of women in a southern university. Many of the women they studied viewed boyfriends as a source of prestige and romantic relationships as positive, normal, and desirable. However, women in this study also admitted to having difficulty with achieving a balance between their romantic relationship, work, academic classes, and their peer involvement. Holland and Eisenhart found that contrary to popular belief, women who fell in love did not lower their ambitions because they fell in love. Rather, they lowered their ambitions and then they fell in love. The enemy of ambition in some of these high-achieving young women was their own peer group of other women. Almost all of the women studied by Holland and Eisenhart gradually experienced a decline in their ambitions and their aspirations, pointing again to the importance of planning for

gifted girls across their life spans.

### **Confusion About Passivity and Assertiveness; Ambivalence About Ambition and Accommodation**

What should be the personality attributes of women who are ambitious and who want to succeed? Confusion about how to balance success seems to trouble many talented women with a "feminine" personality. Maria Goeppert Mayer once had a conversation with her son in which she was critical of at least one woman whom she considered a "pushy" female scientist at the University of Chicago. One of her biographers reported that she told her son Peter, "I was like that once ... so I pulled back and then everything came to me" (Gabor, 1995, p. 142). Being perceived as pushy, aggressive, or even ambitious is troubling to many talented females who often consciously or unconsciously refrain from speaking too much for many reasons.

Fear of sounding too aggressive or too smart, stereotypical views about who should speak more often, manners which have been instilled by parents, and other issues related to negative perceptions from the opposite sex cause smart women to become confused about their roles. This confusion confronts young girls

almost from the moment they consciously begin to understand that there is an opposite sex. What kind of person am I? Who do I act like?

Women who fell in love did not lower ambitions because of falling in love. Rather, they first lowered their ambitions and then they fell in love.

If I talk too much and am reprimanded at home, why should I speak out in school?

Reis (1998) found in interviews both with young girls and older women that too much attention paid to manners in childhood can cripple a talented girl's attitude and her ability to question and speak out.

- "Don't interrupt."
- "Don't ask so many questions."
- "Don't raise your hand so much."
- "Don't be so aggressive."

Being perceived as pushy, aggressive, or ambitious is troubling to many talented females who often consciously or unconsciously refrain from speaking too much...

These types of admonishments from parent to child plant the first seeds of passivity which may eventually create a young

woman who doesn't ask questions, doesn't raise her hand, and gives up speaking out in class.

### **So What Comes First? My Work or Those I Love?**

The greatest conflict for talented women in their 20s, 30s, and 40s concerns the interaction between their career and personal lives. This intensely personal struggle to try to develop their personal talents while they also try to meet the needs of those they love causes gifted women the most conflict, guilt, and pain. Maric Mileva Einstein, Albert Einstein's first wife, was a gifted mathematician with extremely high potential and a fellow classmate at the prestigious Swiss Federal Polytechnic. In a biographical study of her life, Andrea Gabor (1995) found that "the more insecure Maric became in her relationship with Einstein, the more she came to identify her interests with his, ultimately putting Einstein's welfare ahead of her own" (p. 12). After she married Albert and had their children, her life changed drastically. Friends recalled that she often spent all day cleaning, cooking, and caring for the children and then would busy herself in the evening proofreading her husband's work and doing mathematical calculations to help him in his writings.

Constructing a personal and professional life for gifted

women is an intensely difficult challenge, and putting the needs of their husbands or partners ahead of their own needs is an ongoing personal decision that has not often been effectively reconciled in many women's lives. Consider the reflections of the daughter of Margaret Meade, Mary Catherine Bateson (1990): "As a young woman, I never questioned the assumption that when I married what I could do would take second place to what my husband could do" (p. 40).

This cultural dilemma is described by Faludi, the author of *Backlash*, who believes she is leading the life her mother was denied. When Faludi was growing up, she was torn:

I would look at the women in my neighborhood, and they were all mothers, Cub Scout leaders and cooking chocolate chip cookies, and part of me wanted to grow up and have a station wagon. But the other part of me wanted to be mayor of New York City. (Pogash, 1992, p. 67)

Doris Kearns Goodwin (1997), a noted historian, had similar feelings which developed after spending a day at work with her father, a bank executive:

Before this day, I had felt that my father and the other men had moved in a world of interests inaccessible to me; now I had glimpsed the other side, and I resolved someday to enter that larger world. I

would go to work like my father, and yet I would somehow keep house the way my mother did, preparing lunch when the kids came home from school. How I would accomplish this I did not know, but the desire stayed with me. (p. 105)

Most women assume the responsibilities for childcare, after-school care, summer activities, camps, homework, and other related child issues. Sandra Day O'Connor became the first woman to serve as the majority leader of a state senate. What is described as an extremely hectic work life by biographer Andrea Gabor (1995), though, never interfered with her family life.

...too much attention paid to manners in childhood can cripple a talented girl's attitude and her ability to question & speak out.

"Come 4:30 or 4:45, she would collect her handbag and say in that matter-of-fact way of hers: 'I have to go home now and get dinner ready'" (p. 261). Day O'Connor made accommodations, however, including having full-time household help, hiring teenagers to drive her children to their sports lessons, and finding other types of support. Sandra Day O'Connor seemed to have made time to keep a schedule that even her sons found exhausting. She went to

PTA meetings, checked homework, and typed all of her children's papers until they took typing classes at school. Surviving on limited sleep, she worried about her sons and seems to have paid attention to every detail of their childhood while simultaneously trying to let them develop their own independence (pp. 261-263).

In addition to the responsibilities of children, more recent years have seen an added wrinkle to the complex decisions facing women. Just when many enter the time in which their responsibilities to their children decrease, they struggle to cope with the responsibilities of taking care of aging parents. A different pattern has emerged for women and men regarding care of elderly parents. While sons typically offer financial assistance, daughters and daughters-in-law more often provide the hands-on care.

## Summary

The accomplishments of some gifted females and the underachievement of others is a complex issue dependent upon many factors, including personal choices and decisions. Our current societal structure virtually eliminates the possibility that the majority of gifted females who marry and have children can achieve at a similar level as their male counterparts, at least for the 18 year commitment they make to raising a child, and now possibly, another

commitment they make to caring for aging parents. While the importance of maternal or family giftedness to our society cannot be underestimated, it is often not enough for women who want more, or women who have a sense of destiny about making a difference in the world. While our society has a critical need for those who excel in traditional female careers, such as teaching and nursing, decisions to pursue these careers should be considered by those who have been exposed to the full range of options available to them.

Gifted young females should explore careers, further education, and plan and pursue professional opportunities that will challenge their intellect, as well as fit into their personal plans for the future. Families, schools, and businesses need to

offer talented women across the life span opportunities that will enable them to continue to examine and pursue their personal choices. Talented women should learn to assess and determine whether they are finding the time needed for their own talent development. If they are not able to develop their talents, they should learn to examine why and be proactive about what is required to help them to realize their potential.

The exploration and discussion of the personality issues and personal choices facing talented girls and women should be encouraged. Personality development is intricate and complex. What one young girl regards as an impossible obstacle may be regarded as an intriguing challenge by another. How the same obstacles differentially affect girls and women

provides the fascination of researching their accomplishments. Resilience, rebellion, multipotentiality, different cycles of creativity, and extremely high achievement in the face of obstacles, such as poverty and a complete absence of support characterize many of the gifted women. Yet, they persist. Can this type of persistence, determination, and will be learned or is it the result of innate personality traits? Many gifted women developed these characteristics throughout their lives, and it is precisely this act of development that creates their success--an active, evolutionary success learned throughout their life span. Exploring how and when they develop these characteristics will help all of us to guide gifted females in their journeys at all stages in their lives.

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