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Abstract

The phenomenon of social coping among students with gifts and talents (SWGT) is not well understood. In interviews with elementary-, middle-, and high-school aged SWGT ($N$ = 90; 50% female) from the United States, United Kingdom, South Korea, Ireland, and France, the universality of awareness of visibility of their exceptional abilities, high expectations and pressure to achieve from adults and peers, and peer jealousy and rejection, was confirmed. In all countries, SWGT were concerned about peers' upward social comparison and the effects of their outperformance on peers' feelings. SWGT attempted to hide their abilities or conform to peers' behaviors. Prosocial helping behaviors were found among SWGT in nearly all age groups and a focus on the self was a useful coping strategy to students in all countries except France. Parallels are drawn between these findings and Goffman's (1963) stigma theory.

Keywords: cross-cultural, social experience, peer relationships, stigma, social comparison, global awareness, psychology of gifted students

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## Introduction

Students with gifts and talents (SWGT)[1], by any definition, are unlike the majority of their peers in their ability or potential to achieve academically. At the same time, they are children or adolescents and similar to their peers in many ways. Like all children and adolescents, they need to be accepted, yet their differences may inhibit acceptance among the majority of their age-mates (J. Cross, 2016). The social experience of SWGT has been studied from a variety of angles. Some researchers have examined perceptions of SWGT among their peers (e.g., Händel, Vialle & Ziegler, 2013; Rudowicz & Cheung, 2013; Tannenbaum, 1962), finding a bias against academically successful students. Following from Goffman's (1963) interpretation of stigma as differentness from what is "ordinary and natural" (p. 2), Coleman (1985) proposed that giftedness would be the type of differentness that "prevents, or, at least, interferes with, full social acceptance and personal development" (p. 163). Coleman proposed a stigma of giftedness paradigm (SGP) with three tenets: 1) SWGT, like all students, desire normal interactions with their classmates; 2) as others learn of their giftedness, they will be treated differently; and 3) SWGT can increase their social latitude by managing the information others have of them. Research evidence supports the SGP. For example, Cross, Coleman and Terhaar-Yonkers (1991) found that, in situations where their giftedness would be evident to peers, high school SWGT would make choices about how truthful to be about their interest in learning or the ease of an exam. Some students would change the subject (cop-out) when directly asked how easy an exam was for them. Others would lie rather than be "outed" as someone with exceptional abilities.

[1] This acronym allows the authors to use preferred people-first language, avoiding the entity framing of the term "gifted students".

According to social comparison theory, individuals are motivated to evaluate themselves through comparisons with others (Festinger, 1954). Downward comparisons are made with those who are "less than" they are and upward comparisons with those who are "better than" they are. Downward comparisons can make us feel better about ourselves, whereas upward comparisons can lead to negative feelings. In the academic realm, SWGT are likely to be the target of upward comparisons, having performed better than their peers. This targeting can lead to negative feelings on the part of the outperformer (Exline & Lobel, 1999). Fear of being the target of threatening upward social comparisons can lead to diminished performance (Peplau, 1976). Striley (2014) found the secondary-school-aged SWGT of her sample were made to feel inferior because of their differentness. Gross (1989) suggested that SWGT may underachieve to be accepted; forced to make a choice between learning and building relationships. The consequences of these behaviors may be a severe stunting of the development of talent.

The response to stigmatization has been studied in a variety of ways. The *lived experience* of SWGT has been examined through phenomenological research, identifying important aspects of identity development, stigmatization, and motivation (see Coleman, Micko, & Cross, 2016 for a review). Striley (2014) explored the "stigma of excellence" among secondary students ($N$ = 169) through an open-ended survey. SWGT *social coping strategies* have been studied quantitatively, as well. Swiatek (1995) developed an instrument, the Social Coping Questionnaire (SCQ), with items reflecting such strategies as denial of one's giftedness, using humor, engaging in many extracurricular activities, denying the impact of giftedness on one's acceptance by peers, conformity, helping others, and emphasizing the unimportance of one's popularity. Goffman (1963) called such coping strategies attempts at *passing*, or efforts to pass as normal. The SCQ has been used in a number of studies of social coping, with findings

indicating both positive and negative associations between students' well-being and their strategy use (e.g., Chan, 2003; Cross, O'Reilly, Kim, Mammadov, & Cross, 2015; Swiatek, 2001; Swiatek & Cross, 2007; Swiatek & Dorr, 1998).

Despite this research attention, there remain many unanswered questions about the nature of the social experiences of SWGT. This study attempts to explore a hypothesized model of social coping, with the hope of shedding light on the actual social experiences of SWGT and their responses to them. The SCQ was developed based on research conducted with US samples, but it has been used in international settings (e.g., Chan, 2003, 2004; Cross et al., 2015). Anecdotal evidence suggests that attitudes toward giftedness may be quite different in other cultures. The low reliability of SCQ factors with a variety of samples (e.g., Cross et al., 2015; Rudasill, Foust & Callahan, 2007) is an indication that the social experiences of SWGT and their responses to it are not fully understood. As gifted education is expanding around the world, the importance of understanding this phenomenon globally has implications for professionals working with SWGT. The research methods used in the present study allow both a targeted, narrow spotlight concentrated on students' social experiences and a broad floodlight on developmental, cultural, and sex differences.

**A Model of Coping Among SWGT**

We hypothesized that social experiences both in school and outside of school are determined or influenced by such factors as age (developmental progress), sex, the type of services or programs in which they engage, and the stigma they perceive (see Figure 1). These social experiences and their influences will lead to behaviors aimed at passing for normal or choosing not to do so. In this study, we sought to identify the social experiences of SWGT as they relate to their exceptional academic abilities and to uncover the influence of these factors in

both the experiences and in their response to the experiences. We further anticipated that culture affects both the social experiences of SWGT and their coping responses. By examining social experiences in multiple cultures, it becomes possible to tease out the universality of features of various experiences.

**The Present Study**

In this initial exploration of the hypothesized model of coping among SWGT, a qualitative method was determined to be most appropriate. The purpose of the study is to "deepen *understanding and explanation"* (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014, p. 101) of coping among SWGT. The hypothesized model allows for a variable-oriented approach to identifying probabilistic relationships among the variables. This study is built on a postpositivistic, constructivist framework (Lincoln & Guba, 2000), with the aim of inquiry being an understanding from a reconstruction of multiple voices, which coalesce around consensus on the social experience of giftedness. This is a multiple-case study, with each country providing similar (age, sex) and contrasting (country) cases (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984). This purposive sample selection was chosen to strengthen "the precision, validity, stability, and trustworthiness of the findings." (Miles et al., 2014, p. 33).

To effectively carry out this study with a carefully selected, cross-cultural sample, the design of the study needed to be tight, so that parallel findings would emerge in all settings (Miles et al., 2014). The instrument of data collection – the interview questions – were specified clearly so that the many various interviewers asked parallel questions. Comparable data was needed to make meaningful comparisons. The highly prescribed interview questions were developed from the conceptual framework. Despite this level of specification, the participating SWGT were given latitude to freely express their thoughts in response to questions, allowing

their voices to drive the findings. Through this research design, we hoped to achieve a depth of understanding not possible through other methods.

## Method

### Participants

Students ($N$ = 90; 50% female) in five countries participated in the study: the United States, Ireland, United Kingdom, France, and South Korea. In each country, 18 students (three male and three female students in each age group) who had been identified as gifted through their school systems or out-of-school programs volunteered to participate: elementary (ages 8-10[2]), middle (ages 11-14), and high school (ages 15-18).

**France.** The French participants were identified as gifted on the basis of their Weschler IQ score of 130 or more. Demographic surveys were completed for 16 of the 18 students who participated in the study. Two elementary students, one boy and one girl, did not submit the survey. All reported statistics are based on the 16 students who submitted demographic surveys. Students surveyed were from the ages of 7 to 17. Most students (93%) attended a mixed-sex school, with one missing a response. Three-fourths of the French students attended a general education school, with 19% attending a "high potential" school, and one reported a combination of general education and high potential schools. Forty-four percent of students attended public schools, 37% attended private schools, and 19% reported having attended both public and private schools. Thirty-one percent described some type of gifted academic support from their school. Nearly all (93%) of the French students' mothers had some level of post-high school education, while 75% of their fathers had completed some level of post-high school education.

[2] South Korean elementary students were older, due to the structure of South Korean school systems.

**Ireland.** The Irish students were all participants in programs of the Centre for Talented Youth-Ireland. To participate in these programs, elementary students must score in the 95th percentile or higher on any standardized ability or achievement test, while secondary students must score in the 95th percentile or higher on the SAT exam. All Irish students completed a demographic survey. Students surveyed were between the ages of 8 and 16. The majority (89%) surveyed were White and 11% were Asian Indian. All students in Ireland attended general education programs, with 22% attending private schools and 78% attending public schools. Just over half (56%) of students attended mixed-sex schools, with 22% attending boys-only schools and 22% attending girls-only schools. Seventeen percent described receiving some form of gifted academic support from their school.

Among the Irish students, 83% reported mothers having post-secondary school education, 11% having a secondary school education, and 6% a professional qualification. Most (89%) of students' fathers reported post-secondary school education and 11% reported a secondary school education.

**South Korea.** The South Korean students participating in the survey were from the same geographically central, moderately sized province in South Korea. Students surveyed were between the ages of 12 and 17, representing grades 6 through 12. Elementary schools in South Korea include students up to age 12. Most students (89%) attended a mixed-sex school and 2 students (11%) attended a boys-only school. All students were identified as SWGT using an aptitude test created by the Korean Educational Development Institute. All of the participants reported attending public schools. Seven out of 18 students responded to questions about their parents' education. Of these, one reported the father had a high school education, five reported a

bachelor's degree, and one reported Ph. D. degree. Five students reported their mothers had bachelor's degrees and two reported master's degree.

**United Kingdom.** All UK students had been identified as gifted using the varied criteria of their different schools. Students surveyed were between the ages of 8 and 18. Students were predominantly White (89%), with one student reporting as Asian Indian and one as White/Chinese. The majority (78%) of students attended general education, public schools, while 22% attended selective, private schools. All students attended mixed-sex schools, and 83% reported receiving some form of gifted academic support from their school.

Seventy-two percent of UK students reported their mothers had a post-secondary school education, with 22% having a secondary school education. More than three-fourths of students' fathers had post-secondary school education, with 22% having a secondary school level education.

**United States.** All US students had been identified as gifted according to the criteria of their different school districts. All attended urban schools in two large metropolitan areas in the South Atlantic region (US Census, 2018), which have a higher than average African American population. Students surveyed were between the ages of 8 and 18. A third of students identified as Black or African American, 22% identified as White, 11% identified as Spanish/Hispanic/Latino, and 33% identified as Other (White/Black; White/Black/American Indian; White/Black/Spanish; Black/Other Asian; White/Black/American Indian; Black/American Indian or Alaskan Native). Twenty-eight percent of students reported attending a general education school, 11% reported both general education and gifted programs, and 61% did not report type of education. All students attended public, mixed-sex schools, and 83% reported receiving some form of gifted academic support from their school.

Most US students (79%) reported their mothers had some form of post-secondary school education, while 16% reported a high school education, and 5% did not respond. Half of students reported their fathers had some form of post-secondary school education, while 31% reported their fathers had graduated from high school, 6% reported some high school education, and 13% did not report.

**Procedure**

The study was approved by the William & Mary Protection of Human Subjects Committee and was conducted in accordance with ethical standards. In their training packets, interviewers received information about participants' rights and the confidentiality of data. Parents of participants signed informed consent and permission forms, which were translated as appropriate. Interviews took place in 2013 and 2014. Subjects were solicited variously by country. For example, in Ireland, students participating in CTY-I enrichment programs were invited to be interviewed. In the US, flyers were sent home with students in the gifted programs of two urban school districts, requesting volunteers. Individual interviews of approximately 30-45 minutes (interviews were longer among the high school students) were conducted after hours at the students' schools or in the program facilities by the researchers or trained interviewers. All interviews were audio recorded. Prior to the interview, participants completed a survey with demographics, school information, and a scenario adapted from Cross et al. (1991).

**Survey**

A three-page survey requested demographics, including parents' education level and occupation, and school history (e.g., type of school attended – private, gifted, coed). A scenario was adapted from Cross et al. (1991), which describes a social situation SWGT may find themselves in. It was modified to make the test situation being described appropriate for younger

and older students. In the scenarios, elementary students were discussing a test on the solar system, middle school a biology exam, and high school an anatomy diagram.

**Interview Protocol**

Interviews consisted of 22 questions, with several subquestions (e.g., "Can you give me an example of…" "Can you think of a time when…") specified. Sample questions are included in the appendix. Interviewers received a training document describing the purpose of the study and background research supporting the interview questions. They were encouraged to follow up with students to pursue evidence related to the hypothesized model.

**Analysis**

Audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed. South Korean and French interviews were translated into English. In the first cycle of analysis, data were coded according to the hypothesized variables in the model (Figure 1). This hypothesis coding (Miles et al., 2014) was conducted by two trained research assistants, who individually coded the same transcripts, then met to discuss their results with the objective of reaching 100% agreement on the application of codes. Once there were no disagreements in these meetings, the research assistants completed the remainder of interview coding individually. In the second cycle of coding, the coded excerpts were analyzed to identify patterns. Taking each variable from the hypothesized model (i.e., "social experience," "stigma," etc.), five team members examined the excerpts with that code applied, looking for patterns that appeared with notable frequency in the excerpts for their assigned countries. The patterns were agreed on and clarified, then the excerpts were reviewed to identify the presence or absence of patterns in each country. Brief reports were created by country, describing the pattern and its operation in that country's sample. From these patterns, recurring categories and sub-themes were identified. Multiple representatives were needed for a

category or sub-theme to be included in the final report. Two team members found exemplar statements by country and age group and used these to create the tables that appear below. Member checking was not possible, but credibility was attained through the number of participants.

## Findings

The original hypothesis coding organized the interviews into three main categories: social experience, stigma, and coping. The next phase of pattern coding resulted in sub-themes that further defined the way SWGT across cultures experienced those categories. These categories and sub-themes are further described below. Subject identifiers are made up of the country code, age group (E=elementary, M=middle, H=high), sex (F=Female, M=Male), and subject reference number (1-3). For example, FMM1 is the first French, middle school-aged, male subject; UKHF3 is the third UK, high school-aged female subject. The identified themes were found across all grade levels and both identified genders, but patterns were not the same in all countries.

### Social Experience

The Social Experience category was identified by statements that described actual experiences SWGT had with their peers and how they perceived their relationships. This tended to be a combination of awareness of how their peers perceived them and how they responded to those perceptions. Six themes emerged from examining the social experience of SWGT: awareness of others' expectations, pressure, concern for peers' feelings, comfort among gifted peers, confusion over peers' responses, and positive competition. Of these themes, awareness of others' expectations, pressure, concern for peers' feelings, confusion over peers' responses, and

comfort among gifted peers were present in all countries (see Table 1). Positive competition was only seen in the UK and South Korea.

**Awareness of others' expectations.** Students described being aware of the expectations of others, including peers, teachers, or family. This might be plainly stating that others expect them to do well: "Especially before exams and things, people will be saying, 'Oh, you're expected to get high marks – you don't need to work'" (UKHF2). It may also be indirect evidence of that expectation, such as peers commenting about the student's high grades or others' reactions when the SWGT did not do well: "the teacher was disappointed in me which made me a bit annoyed and sad" (IRMF1). This awareness was distressing to some students: "I still have to worry about people looking up to me" (USEM3). At times the awareness of others' expectations was based more on speculation than direct observation:

> They say I think "Oh, that one – he is super-intelligent, so we're not going to bother with him very much because maybe he's going to say he's very clever and he knows a lot of things and he's going to prove it to us." (FEM2)

These expectations were seen to stem from academic ability, but were not limited to academic contexts. A SWGT in South Korea believed that "they think that people who are good in academics have to be good in everything, including having good behaviors and respecting others" (KMM2).

**Pressure.** SWGT described pressure as an effect of awareness of expectations. Students mentioned that they feel the need to continue to excel, often because they know others expect them to.

> It's a struggle with school where girls in my class will just comment on it. If they get above me in a test, it's a big thing for them and they really, they don't let it go.

> Constantly there's pressure there to do well just so you're not pointed out in class for not doing well. (IRHF1)

Pressure was often described in terms of consequences, with students mentioning what would happen if they did not do well, such as being teased for falling short or removed from gifted classes. A student in the UK balanced the positive aspects of giftedness with this pressure to perform for peers, saying "Sometimes I feel like I'm a rock star and they're my fans, but if I hit the wrong note or something then they'll all boo me" (UKEM3). This highlights the sometimes precarious notions of giftedness. Students felt pressure to maintain their appearance and status as gifted:

> But, also the other kids look up to you and they put a lot of pressure on you. Like, if you don't do as well, they will like, I guess, they won't see you as smart as you really are. (USEM3)

> That's why I don't think it's good to be the best, even though I want to be, because everyone expects a lot and when you don't reach it, people are disappointed. (IRMF1)

Consequences of failure in the short- and long-term were seen by some SWGT as dire, even at an early age. One French middle schooler described,

> I am very disappointed when I learn that there's someone who's got better grades than mine…. [A]s soon as I get a bad grade I'm afraid it's going to jeopardize my student file. I'm also afraid for the studies I want to do later because I'm afraid I won't succeed, because too big a workload, for me, too much pressure, it – after a while I can't take it anymore. (FMM3)

SWGT also feel pressured to help their peers, as this South Korean high-schooler describes: "I like helping honestly, but sometimes I have things to do, but I can't ignore them asking for help. It's too much expectation" (KHM1).

Pressure was most often described in the context of their classmates, but also came from parents and teachers. For some, expectations from parents were "pressuring and uncomfortable" (KMM1), with one South Korean student describing the strain by saying, "I think that I should meet their expectations so I work hard, but sometimes I'm tired. I get upset when parents emphasize academics when I'm feeling that way" (KMM1). South Korean students described extreme pressure from adults, who openly and frequently compared them to higher achieving peers, even as elementary students. The SWGT in this study were often held up as the model student for comparison, leading to pressure to perform and difficult relationships with peers.

> [My peer] doesn't hate me just because I am good in academics, but his Dad keeps comparing him with me so he got so stressed so sometimes he bothers me at school. (KEM1)

> [My friend's mother] keeps comparing her saying things like [KEF1] would be studying right now while you are laying around. I don't want our friendship to get awkward, so I wish they don't compare me; I hate it the most. (KEF1)

Intense pressure to achieve sometimes led to friction with parents, as one South Korean student described:

> My Mom nags me a lot. She doesn't say specific things but just says study, study, study, when I'm playing at home….so I talk back to her a lot….I just come into my room after fighting with Mom. I write a note to my Mom, tear it up, and then study. (KMF1)

Pressure to perform well eventually becomes internalized; one student describes her parents' reaction by saying, "When I get a 12 they're not very happy," and says of her pressure "I'm quite stressed each time there's an evaluation, I'm quite stressed and, yes, for me it's important" (FMF3). When asked how she dealt with the pressure, one student explained, "I study harder. There is no other way" (KHF3). SWGT are not only aware of expectations, but feel pressured to meet them.

**Concern for peers' feelings.** This theme describes a general concern for the feelings of others, usually in response to giftedness. SWGT were concerned that their abilities might make others feel inadequate. This was often attributed to potential comparison, either by their peers or by teachers. In explaining her choice to not tell the truth in response to the scenario described in the interview, one SWGT described not wanting to compare grades, "because others found it difficult and I wouldn't want them to feel bad because they clearly worked hard for it" (IRHF3). SWGTs' perspective taking also led them to worry about their peers' feelings: "I'd feel really bad if someone said, 'I thought [the exam] was kind of easy.' I'd feel like I was stupid and it was my fault that I couldn't do it." (USEM3); "If I said that the exam was easy, other friends might feel bad" (KMF3). Repeatedly, this concern for others led to students staying quiet about their abilities or results, instead wanting to "say something that won't make them feel bad about themselves" (UKHF1). One student reported not wanting to discuss assignments, so as "not to create a feeling of jealousy" (FMM1).

**Comfort among gifted peers.** SWGT described feeling more comfortable among gifted peers. They felt a sense of belonging, shared interests, or increased ability to communicate effectively. A student described her first experience in a gifted program where her classmates all had high ability:

> I was really shocked. It was strange. My first class in Novel Writing we were discussing *Ulysses* and what was wrong with *Twilight* and it was crazy. Everyone had very similar interests to me and I fitted in very quickly. (IRHF1)

Sometimes this was mutually exclusive to feeling comfortable around nongifted peers, but other times it was described more as a different type of interaction. In France, a student described her gifted abilities as "more of a handicap, but with my two friends, who are gifted too, well, yeah, I think it [their friendship] helps (FMF2)." Other students appreciated the benefits of having gifted friends: "If you think about it positively, that means that you get more information by hanging out with friends who are good in academics (KMM2)."

**Confusion over peers' responses.** SWGT sometimes did not understand how their peers respond to them. Some students were unsure why their peers say certain things: "I can tell during class when they say 'Why does she act like she knows everything?' when I didn't even brag about what I know" (KEF2). Often there was confusion over being targeted for bullying: "Sometimes they make a bit of fun of me because I always know the answer. It's not just me though, as they make fun of people who don't know any answers. It doesn't make sense really" (IRMM3). Others seemed more confused by peers' actions, such as this UK student who did not understand why his classmates wanted to sit near him during work: "It was really weird because they were sat down doing spelling homework, and they were trying to do some spellings, and they kept sitting next to us" (UKEM1). Peers' desire to avoid the work required to learn was mystifying to several SWGT. One US middle school student responded to a peer who wanted to copy her work, "I said, 'How you gonna learn anything if you just lookin' at my paper, because I can't help you when it comes to [the state achievement test] and things'" (USMF1).

**Positive competition.** In the UK and South Korea, students mentioned that competition has positive aspects. This generally involved being pushed to do better in their own school work and to the fullest of their own ability: "The competition is intense since all the good students are gathered so I'm motivated automatically that I have to work hard" (KEF2). It also included positive social aspects to competition such as friendly banter, small bets, and bonding.

> Well, I sort of feel quite proud, because this person who's also a very high achiever and we've sort of quite friendly competition between the two of us; so it's always quite nice to beat him just for pride and bragging rights, and that kind of thing; but nothing sour. (UKMM1)

Seeing competition as a positive seemed to change how students viewed expectations: "It feels like you have quite high expectations, but not in a bad way, 'cos it feels good. 'Cos some people don't like to push themselves to do their best, but I do" (UKHF1).

**Stigma**

Stigma was a grouping of codes around the SGP (Coleman, 1985), which states that SWGT desire normal interactions, but believe this will not be possible once others know of their giftedness. To achieve normal social interactions, then, SWGT will manage the information others have about them (Cross, Coleman, & Stewart, 1995). Evidence of the SGP was found in all countries in the following subthemes: Rejection by peers, awareness of visibility, perception of jealousy, and avoidance of bragging (see Table 2). A subtheme of having only a few close friends was only present among SWGT in Ireland, the US, and France.

**Rejection by peers.** Rejection by peers was seen in descriptions of negative treatment of SWGT by their peers. This often included name calling; one student said she had no complaints about giftedness, "except that I'm regularly being called a nerd" (FEF1). This teasing seemed to

be directly related to a gifted identity, with students sharing that peers say things like "'Oh, you're a nerd' and 'What, do you have no life?'" (USHF1). One Irish girl reported that boys were particularly targeted, "If you're a bit nerdy and a boy, the popular guys would hammer you. The girls have it easier, I would say" (IRMF1).

SWGT are sometimes put in a difficult social situation because of their abilities, as in this example from an Irish elementary girl: "My friend asks me for an answer and I tell her that I can't tell her because it's a test, sometimes, she like, doesn't play with me anymore" (IREF2). Exclusion from activity or social groups was a common feeling, even when the SWGT did not want to participate: "I felt kind of left out, because they used to talk about stupid things, and, yeah, I didn't fit in" (UKMF1). Students sometimes described general feelings rather than specific examples: "In some sense this isolates you a bit, because people will view you as a little different" (IRHF2). At times, this negative treatment was just an accepted part of the gifted experience: "Some kids are jealous and envious, and some kids will hate" (KHM1).

**Awareness of visibility.** SWGT described being aware of their visibility as a SWGT. When directly mentioned, this included other students referring to their giftedness, "especially before exams and things, people will be saying, 'Oh, you're expected to get high marks – you don't need to work'" (UKHF2). Sometimes awareness was tied more to perceptions or assumptions of how others thought, such as a student who said, "I'm like saying things too nerdy and it just feels, self-conscious, like I feel as though they're thinking of me as some nerd" (USHF2). The awareness of visibility is reinforced among the faculty, as one French student describes: "We're different but it doesn't mean people have to treat us like weirdos. My history teacher told me once that when he says he's at [my school] to his colleagues, people tell him it's

the loonies' school" (FMM2). Some students felt forced to hide or conform to avoid the visibility, as in this high schooler's experience:

> Last year in biology, like whenever I knew the answer, I did not want to answer 'cause I felt bad that everyone else wasn't understanding it, so I didn't really want to answer…. Whenever I understood something about –I think it was Mendel's table–she'd ask us all to come up to the board and no one would go up there, so I felt peer pressure not to go up there. (USHF3)

Visibility was not always seen as negative, "I'm proud of being a nerd. Overall it is a positive experience" (IRMF3).

**Perception of jealousy.** Students specifically mentioned jealousy or envy from their peers in response to their ability. Jealousy – wanting what the SWGT possesses – was described as a specific motivation for peers' actions, an interpretation of their words, or just a general suspicion. When asked to speculate about why peers treated them differently, many SWGT came to the conclusion of jealousy:

> I feel like other kids have that thought that, "Oh, he's too smart for me" or maybe that I'm just being an idiot and just speaking out the side of my mouth. When really it might be a fact that they might be a little bit jealous maybe? (USHM2)

This perception was tied directly to giftedness: "The others, they are a little jealous and so they pay me less attention. They are less friends with me than if I was normal" (FEM2). One effect of this perception was that some students were not achieving to their potential, as this French high school student described: "I don't want to be the best because when you're the best it's – well people always get jealous." (FHF3).

In many interviews, it was clear there was just a perception of jealousy, without any specific evidence. Students tried to find explanations for actions, saying, "I suppose there are times when people do pick on you for [giftedness], probably because they're jealous" (UKMM1). They may have been encouraged to this belief by others, as in this case: "Well, I'm normally a bit teased, and [my friend] said that they're just jealous, really…. and that's what my mum says, too" (UKEF3). Some students did not mention a direct experience of jealousy, but speculated that it would exist if they were not careful in how they presented themselves: "Well, I don't talk about it, just in case there's people who might be jealous, so I just keep it to myself" (IREM2). However, some instances of jealousy were much more open: "Kids who are not good at academics are jealous of me. Sometimes they say 'I wish I was you for a day in my lifetime'" (KEF1).

**Avoidance of bragging.** SWGT mentioned not wanting to brag or boast about their abilities or test results. This sometimes coincided with concern for their peers' feelings: "I think I'd feel like I was bragging because others found it difficult and I wouldn't want them to feel bad because they clearly worked hard" (IRHF3). Students were aware that bragging would affect how their peers viewed them, "I don't really brag about myself, so I try to avoid it. I don't want them to get me wrong" (KMF1). Most often it was described as simply being the right thing to do: "Because I don't think it's right to brag about yourself, because that's just boasting" (USHM2). Some students mentioned a past history, as this young French boy explained, "Now I've stopped, but before I used to brag a little" (FEM3). The desire to avoid bragging led to students hiding some of their gifted experiences, such as one student who was "not very keen to tell people results, because they would make it seem like you were boasting about them" (UKHF2).

**Few close friends.** Students with gifts and talents in France, Ireland, and the United States described having few close friends. Sometimes this lack of closeness was negative: "They just have me around for a laugh over a random fact. I don't have any close friends I could talk to. I'm almost comedic to them. They find me a bit of a laugh" (IRHF1). One young SWGT has determined why this is the case: "At school, I don't have many friends and that's probably because of my ability" (IREM1). In describing his social situation as a younger student, one SWGT explained,

> Being smart was my excuse or my explanation for never developing social skills or friendships or relationships. For never understanding what's required of an individual in society, for never understanding how a person should act, and then I had to learn that later on. (USHM3)

As a high schooler, he had improved his social skills and felt more connected to a broad group of peers.

Some students saw positive aspects in having few friends. This middle-schooler has determined that she is not missing out socially:

> I'm not the one who wants to be popular or nothing, 'cause I don't wanna have that many friends. 'Cause, it's just too much drama happens when you have a lot of friends. And, this friend don't like that friend. So, it's just a, just a bunch of girls together. Not boys and girls. It's not that many. But, it doesn't matter to me. As long as I have that one friend. (USMF2).

Alternatively, students mentioned having lots of friends, but only confiding personal details, or details related to giftedness, with some: "there are some [friends] that – I haven't got a lot that know [about the student's giftedness], I think, there are my best friends, they know" (FHM3).

**Coping**

The Coping category consisted of the ways in which SWGT responded to the stigma of giftedness or other social experiences related to their abilities. When faced with social rejection, jealousy, or pressure, they responded with four coping behaviors: hiding, conformity, helping, and self-focus. Hiding, conformity, helping, and self-focus were seen in Ireland, South Korea, the UK, and the US. In France, hiding, conformity, and helping were seen, but not self-focus (see Table 3).

**Hiding.** Hiding is a method of passing or avoiding the stigma of giftedness by decreasing awareness and visibility. Students tried to hide their giftedness or participation in gifted programs. Often this took the form of not offering answers in class, not sharing grades, or not mentioning gifted programs to their friends and peers. Sometimes this was a practice with all peers: "When I go to school there's only… well, I told nobody" (FMF3). When asked directly about grades, some students chose to lie about how they performed rather than reveal their ability: "I said I just didn't do so well" (KEM2). Hiding grades was common, with students saying things like "but I don't normally share my test results" (UKMM3). Students also hid their reactions to success: "I don't wanna make them jealous so I try not to celebrate too much around them" (USEM3). Some described this as a learned response to not fitting in: "I kinda learned not to speak because whenever I did I seemed to say the wrong thing" (IRHF1). Students generally did not like to be held up as an example by teachers, because of the exposure of their giftedness to peers: "When teachers give me compliments in class … I don't like it so much because other kids don't seem to like it so much" (KMF1) "My English teacher, because I'm good at essays, keeps pointing it out to the class and I've started not completing homework assignments because she always reads out mine" (IRHF1).

**Conformity.** Conformity is similar to hiding but takes a more performative approach. Students reported intentionally underperforming, attempting to develop or show interest in topics their peers enjoy, or staying quiet when they disagree with their peers. Sometimes this was seen as necessary for close relationships: "I, like, dumb it down a bit to hang out with my friends" (USHM1). Rather than trying to completely decrease visibility as gifted, students attempted to control how they were perceived by peers, "I don't really think that I'm special and all. I just try and fit in" (IREF3). This does not always succeed:

> We could be talking about something, and say I didn't catch the name of someone, say they were talking about the footballer, Wayne Rooney, and I might only catch "Wayne", and start talking about Wayne Bridge, a different footballer, and then talking with confidence, 'cos you know something about him. (UKMM2)

Students also misrepresented their performance to fit in, "When kids are saying the exam was hard, I say it was too hard, also, even if it was easy for me; like this, I try to get along with friends a lot" (KHF3). Unlike hiding, conformity has a specific goal of matching with peers. One student said that she finished an assignment in ten minutes that took her friends hours, then said, "I found it rather nice – but I said that I spent hours on it" (FHF1).

**Helping.** Helping allows students to cope with negative aspects of giftedness through positive associations with peers. SWGT attempted to use their strengths to assist others with studying, homework, or other general academic issues: "I help people with stuff. They ask a lot of the time. If they're stuck on homework they might ask me" (IRMM1). SWGT acknowledged that the ability to help others is a way to connect with peers:

> Well, if I'm way ahead and my friend is behind and I have the chance to go more ahead or help them, I'd probably choose to help them, because then we could go on together instead of me being by myself. (USEM3)

SWGT often seemed to enjoy helping their peers. "They come to me if they need help, and it's just nice" (UKMF2). Sometimes this was seen as the right thing to do with gifted ability" "I want to help other people by learning more skills about other subject areas like art and PE, since I am interested in giving back my talents" (KEF2). Helping was something students could do to build equality with others.

> I try not to show [my grades] too much or to look at the others' to compare them and tell myself, "Oh, he's stupid or he's better," like that – but I content myself with trying to help them improve and get the same grades as mine. (FEM2)

Helping also eased the strain of peer relationships, when it "stopped them being as resentful about [my abilities]" (UKHF2). On the other hand, the expectation that SWGT will help their peers can be a burden, as this student intimated:

> It's nice that people think that you will be able to help them; but sometimes they have high expectations of you, when you just, you know, want to relax sometimes. (UKEM3)

**Self-Focus.** SWGT frequently responded to negative comments from peers, exclusion, and other negative experiences by focusing on their self. Students stated that focusing on their own work and ability, not comparing themselves to others, and valuing their abilities allowed them to cope with negative peer experiences. Part of this seemed to be related to control, as this Irish student described, "I'd rather feel under pressure from myself than other people because when it's from others, you can't fix it" (IRHF2). During important testing, students valued self-focus: "I thought then, especially, that it was quite important that I didn't compare myself to

everyone else" (UKHF2). Avoiding comparison and focusing on their own results was important to many SWGT: "I feel good since I did well in academics, not because I did better than my friend. It's good because I got satisfying results, but I don't think it's good because you got better grades when comparing with other people" (KMM2). Students mentioned being aware of others who might treat them poorly or not like them, but they do not focus on it: "I don't even sit here and think about it" (USMF3).

**Service Types**

Consistent reporting of the types of gifted services available to students in different countries was difficult to obtain. Students from the US were generally enrolled in some number of gifted classes at their school (Honors classes, gifted courses, International Baccalaureate programs), along with some participation in extracurricular gifted programs. Only three Irish students reported gifted services within their schools, but all were participating in Center for Talented Youth-Ireland (CTYI), an extracurricular gifted program. UK students reported a wide range of services and programs, including advanced classes, special workshops, and academic competitions. In South Korea, participating students reported they were in gifted classes, but these were primarily extracurricular classes in science and math, discussion groups, field trips, and independent studies. Information on service types was not available from France. Many students commented on their level of comfort with academic peers, but it was not clear that all students would prefer a homogeneous environment. With common experiences among such diversity in service types among the participants, no pattern emerged indicating a problematic or ideal environment.

**Age and Sex**

Interviews with very young students tended to be brief, although there were notable exceptions in every country. Interviews with older participants were longer and the longest interviews were with high school students. The ability of SWGT to articulate their social experience improved with age, as did their ability to cope with the negative aspects of it. The general pattern was of

1. elementary students being proud and happy about their recognized abilities ("Well, I do feel proud of myself, but I don't like to go on about it, because I don't want to boast, or anything; but I do feel proud of myself in my head." [UKEF1]), with some surprise about rejection by peers ("I feel good, but kids these days don't say congratulations or anything and they are jealous….which made me feel sad." [KEF1]);
2. older elementary and middle-school students expressing an awareness of the difficulties associated with their giftedness (i.e., high expectations ["Sometimes my friends can get a bit like snappy, like, "Of course you'll do good 'cos, like, you're clever" – and then you get loads of pressure from, like, parents and teachers, who expect you to, like, reach a certain level all the time – and it's hard to like – keep up those standards, or like, even do better than them.[UKMF3], jealousy ["They're [peers are] jealous.[I know] 'cause they just look you up and down and say, 'She think she knows it all.'" [USMF2], rejection ["Some people don't like talking to you because of it [exceptional ability]. In primary school I got bullied because another girl always wanted to do better than me" [IRMF1], etc.); and
3. high school students fully aware of these challenges ("Well, being smarter led to me becoming the isolated person that I was and the socially inept person that I was."

> [USHM3]), but having learned how to deal with them ("Generally [peers] accept [my abilities]. They just think I'm one of those guys that are really enthusiastic. They just sort of expect it of me now a bit. They know that I'm different." [IRHM2]; "It [name calling] would hurt, so I just kind of like hid the fact from people. I can still do it [be correct], but I just keep it to myself now. I've just learned to keep it to myself." [USHM1]).

There were, of course, idiosyncratic exceptions to these general patterns.

In most countries, there was not a perception of sex differences in social experiences, stigmatization, or coping. Several Irish and UK girls noted that males were treated more harshly by peers:

> I think boys get a bit more sort of – not abuse, but more comments about it – for being clever, from other boys; whereas the girls wouldn't say it as much to other girls. But I think boys get a bit more stick for it. (UKHF2)

Peer pressure to be athletic rather than academic may lead some boys away from high achievement:

> I think a lot of guys feel a lot of pressure to act a certain way more than girls do. In my school anyway. They all try to be really sporty and they all pretend that they don't understand things in class and they almost want to do badly and if someone does do badly they're almost praised by their peers for doing badly, so I actually think it might be harder for them. (IRHF3).

> I think, like, sometimes it might be easier for a girl because, like, boys are more sporty and so if you're a really clever boy it might be a bit weird. (UKMF2)

These impressions from the girls were not corroborated by sex-related explanations of harsh treatment by the boys in the UK or Ireland. In the other countries, SWGT did not report sex differences.

## Discussion

In general, the SWGT who participated in this study were pleased with their exceptional abilities. Their giftedness, however, produces a risky social experience, as there is a competing desire to do well, to achieve their very best, and to have friends. Giftedness was definitely a social handicap for many of these SWGT (Cross & Coleman, 1988). Evidence for the SGP was found in every country, as students clearly desired normal social interactions and learned to behave in ways that helped them achieve that social goal, but it was somewhat impacted by cultural differences.

### Through the Lens of the Stigma of Giftedness Paradigm

The purpose of the present study was to better understand the social experience of SWGT, particularly the aspects related to coping. These findings allow us to extend tenets 2 (as others learn of their giftedness, they will be treated differently) and 3 (SWGT can increase their social latitude by managing the information others have of them) of the SGP through an enhanced understanding of how SWGT recognize that others come to learn about their exceptional abilities through their social experiences, how their giftedness affects their relationships with others, and what they do in response (coping). With a few differences by culture and with the exception of type of gifted service, the factors identified in the model (Figure 1) were supported as important influences on coping. The positive social experiences identified – positive competition, comfort with gifted peers – were counterbalanced by the negative experiences of excessive pressure, concern for peers' feelings, and rejection. Others'

expectations and confusion about peers' reactions were two social experiences that require interpretation, a task primarily of the middle school years.

The stigma associated with giftedness is complicated and does not necessarily include the "devaluing" that is commonly part of the definition (Dovidio, Major, & Crocker, 2000). Coleman's (1985) emphasis on differentness is accurate. "Being superior to others is as problematic and pathological as being inferior," wrote Posner (1976, p. 141). The social outcomes of outperforming one's peers (Exline & Lobel, 1999; Exline, Single, Lobel, & Geyer, 2004) are rarely considered in academic settings. The field of gifted education is more intent on achieving potential (e.g., Subotnik et al., 2011). A growing awareness among these participants of the visibility of their exceptional abilities and the subsequent jealousy of their peers drove home the need to avoid being boastful. A lack of humility was considered distasteful in all countries of our sample, perhaps because of its role in increasing the likelihood of jealousy and rejection by peers. Another reason to avoid the visibility of their differentness (their academic superiority) was out of concern for the feelings of "normal" peers.

SWGT increased their social latitude by helping their peers, behaving like them (conforming), hiding their abilities, or focusing on their own abilities and needs. Several of the strategies included in the SCQ (Swiatek, 1995) were not present. In this sample, no students denied their giftedness and the use of humor to deflect attention or win over peers was extremely rare and could not be considered a pattern in the data. Extracurricular activities were rarely mentioned except in describing their daily routines. When asked directly what they would do in the event of discomfort in social situations, no students in any country indicated they attempt to engage in multiple extracurricular activities to alter their visibility as gifted. Strategies for passing during social experiences related to their giftedness were more likely to be aimed at

engaging in prosocial behavior to increase liking (Ladd, 1999), reducing the visibility of their differences (through hiding or conforming), or focusing inward.

**Cross-Cultural Differences**

The trend of forced conformity by peers to the average in the US, UK, Ireland, and France contrasted sharply with the demands from adults and peers to excel in South Korea. The mixed messages (Cross, 1999) received were more powerful in some countries than others. For example, in South Korea, peers and adults, alike, expect SWGT to perform to the best of their abilities. In the other countries, however, peers prefer that SWGT perform like they do (average), while adults expect them to perform to the best of their abilities. Achievement ideals in South Korea are closely linked to perceptions of social support (Park & Kim, 2006). Jiang, Bong, and Kim (2015) propose this as an explanation for their findings of a relationship between conformity and perceptions of parental achievement pressure among South Korean middle-school aged students: by achieving, South Korean students receive emotional support from parents and teachers. In our sample, we see the challenge of this relationship for some young South Korean students, who would prefer not to spend all their time studying. As they mature, however, they accept the need to conform to parental achievement pressure.

Despite this noticeable cultural difference, all students in our sample, including South Korean students, struggled with negative responses to their outperformance of peers. They feared being perceived as boastful and took action to reduce the visibility of their differentness or to offer their abilities to peers when they could. This concern indicates a systemic problem. Average peers would only suffer hurt feelings if there were costly consequences of being outperformed by their classmates, such as embarrassment or reduced self-esteem. It is critical to

our understanding of the social experiences of SWGT that we attempt to learn more about costs to their peers and associated costs to SWGT.

Most subthemes were present to some degree in all countries, but a few were not. It may be significant that the concept of positive competition was present in both UK and South Korea and these are the two countries where SWGT did not mention having only a few close friends. Although it is possible UK and South Korean SWGT simply did not mention their experiences of being socially isolated in interviews, it is also possible this parallel indicates a slightly more positive social environment in these countries. Examples of jealousy and peer rejection were present in both countries, but these SWGT did not complain of a very small social network.

Only in France did SWGT fail to comment on self-focusing behaviors they engaged in to cope with the social challenges of giftedness. Elementary French students commented on engaging in helping behaviors, but these were not seen in older students. Harsh treatment by peers appears to have had a powerful effect on their willingness to expose their abilities, even when they may have been helpful to classmates.

The consistency among SWGT from five different countries of the social experiences and responses to them is remarkable. This speaks to the similar composition of academic environments and their influences on SWGT. Research on underachievement among SWGT consistently emphasizes individual characteristics (e.g., motivation, emotion), neglecting the educational contexts in which these students are less successful than expected (White, Graham, & Blaas, 2018). Considering the challenges identified in the present study, it may be of great benefit to SWGT to undergo a closer examination of their academic environments.

**Avoiding a Spoiled Identity**

The primary motivation for this study of social experiences was to contribute to the maintenance of psychological well-being among SWGT. Building the essential strengths that enable healthy psychosocial functioning is critical not only to talent development (Subotnik, Olszewski-Kubilius, & Worrell, 2011), but also to positive mental health (T. Cross & Cross, 2017). The possibility of anxiety or depression (J. Cross & Cross, 2015, 2017) among students rejected or pressured by others – adults or peers – is very real. The pattern of increasing awareness of the negatives associated with their giftedness is likely to have sent many SWGT underground (J. Cross, Bugaj, & Mammadov, 2016). In fact, the sample of this study represents only those SWGT who found positive ways to respond to their social environments. The selection of participants in each age group (elementary, middle, and high school) who attended gifted programs produced a very specific sample: SWGT who continued to participate in gifted programming. As SWGT become increasingly impacted by the pressure of high expectations and the possibility of peer rejection, some are likely to avoid exposure of their abilities and would not be found in a gifted program. Our high school-aged sample is almost certainly a much smaller segment of the SWGT population than our elementary-aged sample.

With so much evidence of a stigma of giftedness, from this study and many that have gone before (e.g., Coleman & Cross, 1993; Cross et al., 1993; Striley, 2014; Swiatek, 1995), we can examine the stigma literature to learn how we may combat its negative effects. Coleman and Cross (1993) propose we can best help SWGT by learning about their social experiences, that we may "make the school experience of our gifted children as beneficial as possible, offering the fewest academic or emotional hindrances" (p. 39). Stigmatization is a process that unfolds through social experiences. It is possible that we may soften the experience for potentially stigmatized SWGT. Goffman (1963) expressed concern for individuals who remain unaware of

the consequences of exposure of their differentness from normals. “If he is kept too long in the dark, then he will not be prepared for what is to happen to him and, moreover, may be informed about his condition by strangers who have no reason to take the time and care required to present the facts in a constructive, hopeful light.” (p. 91)

According to Goffman (1963), there are four phases of the learning process of the stigmatized person. There is evidence of this process among SWGT in our sample. Table 4 describes these phases, along with the findings from the present study. SWGT learn about what is normal early. Even in South Korea, where performing above average is highly desirable, it is “normal” to perform at an average level and SWGT will be “disqualified” from normality, if discovered. In all countries, we see evidence of passing behaviors. Clearly, Goffman’s explanation of the stigmatization process fits with SWGT. Goffman describes, in great detail, the various ways in which stigmatized individuals may learn to cope with their “condition” to fit into society. He proposes three kinds of places the stigmatized may find themselves:

1. “Forbidden or out-of-bounds places, where persons of the kind he can be shown to be are forbidden to be, and where exposure means expulsion.…
2. “Civil places, where persons of the individual’s kind, when known to be of his kind, are carefully, and sometimes painfully, treated as if they were not disqualified for routine acceptance, when in fact they somewhat are….
3. “Back places, where persons of the individual’s kind stand exposed and find they need not try to conceal their stigma, nor be overly concerned with trying to disattend it.” (p. 81)

The parallels in the social experiences of SWGT are evident: forbidden places, particularly among their mixed-ability peers, where one must change speech patterns or natural responses

that would expose his or her cognitive abilities, or be rejected; civil places, such as the classroom or school, where abilities are an advantage and encouraged by adults, but not necessarily peers; back places, such as special schools or programs, where SWGT can be comfortable with peers.

Based on Goffman's (1963) advice, a healthy identity develops when SWGT learn to recognize these different environments and develop strategies for managing information about their abilities in each place. The challenge to adults is in how to teach children they are different, without making "differentness" such a fixed part of their identity that they are uncomfortable with themselves. Particularly in a world where "gifted" has many meanings that ebb and flow with time and place (Matthews & Dai, 2014), there is a danger in focusing on a child's situational identification as "gifted." As children are developing an identity, what is the effect of fostering the belief that they are different, when they may be similar to their age peers in, for example, physical development, interests, and personality? The balance between helping them fit in with peers and fostering a belief that they are the "other" is a precarious one.

Exline and Lobel (1999) point out that environments that make the superior abilities of SWGT salient to their average peers, that create threats in some way to the outperformed (e.g., humiliation, loss of desirable opportunities), or that have reason to make the SWGT specifically concerned (e.g., for their safety or for damaging relationships), can be places where it is distressing for SWGT to express their true selves (forbidden places). School environments can easily become so forbidding, as when teachers draw attention to students' exceptional performance or when the reward structure creates embarrassment among those unable to participate in gifted programming, for example. The stakes can be very high, as when students in gifted programs receive opportunities for advanced learning to which others do not have access, creating future educational opportunities that are closed to peers. These structural arrangements

are intended to advance academic achievement, but can have the unintended result of impeding social relationships.

Current stigma interventions often target the general non-stigmatized population (Gronholm, Henderson, Deb, & Thornicroft, 2017), attempting to affect devaluing of the stigmatized characteristic (e.g., mental illness, obesity, felon). Mass media campaigns and efforts to increase contact opportunities can reduce discrimination toward devalued stigmatized populations. Such efforts may backfire on stigmatized SWGT, however, particularly in our current atmosphere, when definitions of giftedness are inconsistent. Our subjects worry already about the expectation that they will always be right and the pressures that result. Campaigns to alert the general public about how they are different would almost surely add pressures and misunderstanding to their already complex life.

Perhaps a combination of efforts can be effective in supporting SWGT through the environment and by helping them learn how to cope. Young SWGT can be made aware of the effects of their abilities on peers. Prosocial responding to peers, including helping (when help is welcome) can improve their friendship base. SWGT can learn to be modest about their abilities well before they are discovered by peers. Students labeled "nerd" were more liked by peers when they were modest, sociable, or participated in sports (Rentzsch, Schütz, & Schröder-Abé, 2011). Participation in sports may be particularly helpful, as it can level the playing field with peers at a similar physical developmental level and most sports must be engaged in with peers, rather than in isolation, as is usually the case with time spent studying (J. Cross, 2016).

Schools should be inclusive environments where all forms of diversity, including cognitive diversity, are celebrated. Cooperative activities, appropriately structured, will allow for differentiated instruction within a lesson, where each student is supported at her or his level of

ability. When students each have equal status and are dependent on one another to complete the task, positive social outcomes accompany positive academic outcomes (Aronson, Bridgeman, & Geffner, 1978; Desforges et al., 1991). When schools are designed as competitive environments, with students competing for limited resources (e.g., the highest grade, honors leading to desirable opportunities, teacher attention), students with exceptional abilities are likely to become the targets of social comparison (Exline & Lobel, 1999) to the potential detriment of their social relationships.

The anthropologist Margaret Mead (1954) claimed that, in 1950's American culture, at least, it was important that success be seen to have been worked for: "Success that is the reward of application and hard work is approved fairly ungrudgingly" (p. 211). Competitive environments that are engaged in transparently, characterized by clear accounts of the work required for success, may transform civil places into back places, where SWGT can be recognized for the effort they put forth. Demystifying the process of achieving academic success may help in reducing the stigma associated with exceptional ability.

**Putting the Findings to Use**

How might we utilize Goffman's (1963) recommendation that stigmatized persons learn about forbidden, civil, and back places and how to behave in them to help SWGT cope with the stigma of giftedness? Young SWGT may learn quickly that they have abilities their agemates do not. This recognition that they may be "disqualified" according to the "normal point of view," (Level 2 of Goffman's 1963 stages of learning; see Table 4) can lead to opportunities for instruction in humility, in perspective-taking, and in developing empathy for peers less capable. SWGT should learn to recognize cues that they are in a forbidden place, by observing interactions among others and attending to vocabulary or other markers of acceptable behaviors

in that environment (Miller & Major, 2000). Most people engage in some form of *code switching*, the linguistic phenomenon of speaking in different registers to meet the communication needs of diverse communities (Bell, 1984; Ladegaard, 1995). Verbally gifted SWGT can be taught this linguistic strategy and other adaptive strategies to help them navigate potentially hostile forbidden places; essentially, they can learn to pass as "normal" (Goffman, 1963) or "compensate" for their abnormality (Miller & Major, 2000). They may also decide not to make these efforts, exposing their exceptional abilities to others and accepting the consequences. Such exposure may be helpful, both psychologically and socially, eliminating the need to be constantly self-conscious (Goffman, 1963) and possibly creating a path to acceptance (Miller & Major, 2000). The self-focus seen among the SWGT of this study is a positive "emotion-focused" strategy, which can be nurtured to strengthen SWGT psychological resilience (Crocker & Major, 1989).

Parents, in particular, can model empathy and prosocial behaviors for their children. One study of empathetic parents who told their kindergarten-aged children what others might be thinking or seeing found their children engaged in more prosocial (nice, helpful) behavior (Farrant, Devine, Maybery, & Fletcher, 2012). SWGT in this study found that being helpful created positive relationships with peers, although the expectation that they would help sometimes became burdensome. It is not uncommon for teachers to assign their SWGT as helpers in the classroom, but they should be attentive to the willingness of the SWGT to help, and to the desire of the peer to *be* helped, avoiding potential humiliation (Nadler & Halabi, 2015).

Schools and teachers should avoid creating circumstances that cause a threat to outperformed classmates. Frequently drawing attention to superior performances of SWGT;

holding them up as examples; and offering desirable, exclusive opportunities to the SWGT – all these may make school a civil or forbidden place for SWGT (Goffman, 1963). Their treatment by adults in these situations can lead to "disqualif[ication] from routine acceptance" or "expulsion" (Goffman, 1963, p. 81) by peers. Hiding and conformity (passing as normal) may help them avoid these outcomes, but the SWGT is not free to fully be him- or herself. The objective should be to make schools a back place, where SWGT do not need to hide or conform, but can pursue the development of their exceptional abilities without having to attend to a need to conceal them.

**Limitations**

This study required the involvement of many adults in addition to the SWGT who were interviewed. Steps were taken to ensure all interviewers were familiar with the objectives of the study, but there was a wide range of experience among the interviewers. We attempted to limit differences in the interview process and, in particular, any bias among the interviewers, through the explicit interview protocol. Identification of giftedness differed in each country. Therefore, it is possible there was a relatively broad range of actual ability levels among these participants. A more homogeneous sample may have led to different findings. We believe, however, that the findings we identified here would be confirmed.

The range of ages for elementary, middle, and high school students led to diversity in the maturity of some students, despite being at a similar school level. Because of the researchers' proximity to two large, urban school districts, the US sample was more diverse than is traditionally found in US gifted programs, with only 22% White students. We are reluctant to view this as a limitation, however, because of the insight gained into the experiences of a

population not normally represented in the gifted education literature. The interviews of these nonmodal SWGT expose the superordinate effects of exceptional ability on social experience.

## Conclusion

SWGT the world over need support for developing their talents while maintaining positive relationships with peers. These students require appropriately challenging opportunities to develop competence that do not threaten their social relationships. The stigma of giftedness is complex, including elements of admiration and derision (Coleman & Cross, 1988; Striley, 2014). Schools are tasked with educating all students. For the well-being of SWGT, schools should be humane institutions that support not only academic achievement, but also the social development of students. Our findings among SWGT who have been successful in their gifted education, as evidenced by their persistence in gifted programming, suggest they find ways to manage the experience. What we do not know is the fate of students who were not successful in this endeavor. Future research should attempt to identify younger students who do not persist, even though they are academically able, to learn what social factors turn them away from gifted education.

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Table 1
*Social Experience Subthemes by Country and Grade Level*

| *Country* | Awareness of Others' Expecta-tions | Pressure | Concerned about Peers' Feelings | Comfort-able Among Gifted Peers | Confused by Response of Peers | Positive Competi-tion |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Ireland* | EMH | EMH | EMH | EMH | M | |
| *UK* | EMH | EMH | MH | H | E | MH |
| *US* | MH | MH | EMH | EH | M | |
| *South Korea* | EMH | EMH | M | EH | EH | E |
| *France* | E | MH | EMH | MH | MH | |

Note: E = Present in Elementary interviews, M = Present in Middle School interviews, H = Present in High School interviews

Table 2
*Stigma Subthemes by Country and Grade Level*

| *Country* | Rejection by Peers | Awareness of Visibility | Awareness of Jealousy | Few Close Friends | Avoid Bragging |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Ireland* | EMH | EMH | EMH | EH | EMH |
| *UK* | EMH | EMH | EMH | | EM |
| *US* | EMH | EMH | EMH | MH | EH |
| *South Korea* | EMH | EMH | EMH | | EM |
| *France* | EMH | EMH | EMH | MH | EM |

Note: E = Present in Elementary interviews, M = Present in Middle School interviews, H = Present in High School interviews

Table 3
*Coping Subthemes by Country and Grade Level*

| *Country* | Hiding | Conformity | Helping | Self-Focus |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Ireland* | EMH | EMH | EM | EMH |
| *UK* | EM | M | EMH | MH |
| *US* | MH | MH | EMH | EMH |
| *South Korea* | EMH | H | EMH | EMH |
| *France* | EM | MH | E | |

Note: E = Present in Elementary interviews, M = Present in Middle School interviews, H = Present in High School interviews

Table 4

*Phases of Stigma Learning*

| | **Phases of the learning process of the stigmatized person** (Goffman, 1963, p. 80) | **Findings** |
|---|---|---|
| 1. | Learning the normal point of view. | SWGT learn early that average academic performance is normal. |
| 2. | Learning that he is disqualified according to it. | Because SWGT perform at a superior level, they are not normal. |
| 3. | Learning to cope with the way others treat the kind of person he can be shown to be. | SWGT learn that others may reject them, pressure them, or experience reduced self-worth, if their abilities are found out. |
| 4. | Learning to pass (or choosing not to). | They learn to pass as normal by hiding or conforming or not pass by helping, competing, focusing on themselves, or by being with others similarly stigmatized (other SWGT). |

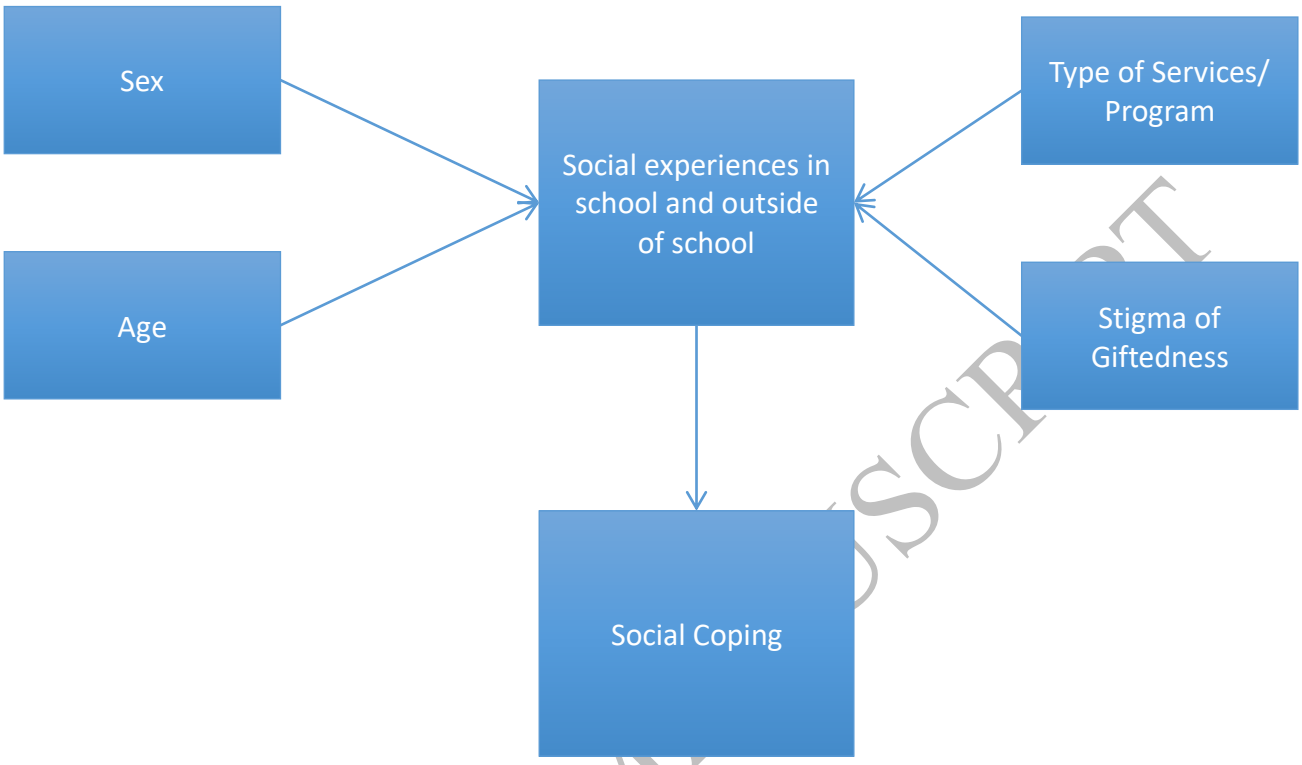


*Figure 1.* Proposed Model of Influences on Coping

# Appendix

## Sample Questions from Interview protocol

1. Tell me about what it is like to be a student with exceptional academic abilities at school.
2. Are there places where you especially think about having high academic ability, either in school or out of school?
3. Are there positive things connected to having exceptional ability?
4. Are there negative things that are connected to having exceptional ability?
5. How do your friends feel about your exceptional abilities?
6. How do other kids your age, ones who are maybe not your close friends, feel about your exceptional abilities?
7. Was there ever a situation you experienced when you thought your exceptional abilities might affect your friendships or your relationships with other kids in a *positive* way?
8. Was there ever a situation when you thought your exceptional abilities might affect your friendships or your relationships with other kids in a *negative* way?
9. Do you ever perform better than your friends?
10. How do YOU feel about your exceptional abilities? Tell me about that.
11. Can you remember a time when you were NOT comfortable/OK with your exceptional abilities? Can you describe that for me?
12. How do adults like your parents or teachers feel about your exceptional abilities?
13. Does the way your parents or teachers feel make you think that you have to act a certain way?
14. What is it like to be a girl/boy with your exceptional abilities?

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