

Giftedness as Disorder: Examining the Dimensionality of the Debate

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Abstract

Determining what must be included in a common description for what constitutes disorder is a crucial task for resolving the debate over whether giftedness is a disorder, and if ethics/responsibility demands its inclusion in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM). Without a clear and agreed-upon definition of what constitutes a disorder, it is difficult to make meaningful comparisons between different conditions or to assess the relative costs and benefits of including certain conditions in future DSM editions. Moreover, it is important to establish clear criteria for what constitutes a disorder non-illness (DNI) and disorder underlying-illness (DUNI) as spectral in the context of mental health, education, and intelligence research, drawing on the insights and expertise of researchers, clinicians—including the gifted. By doing so, we can promote a more productive and evidence-based conversation around the inclusion of giftedness in the DSM and whether giftedness demands heightened, and just attention, which would invigorate the perspectives of social inclusion and social acceptance thereby. Using thematic analysis to evaluate arguments has contributed to the suggestion that a resolution to this argument already exists.

Keywords: giftedness, mental health disorder, social disorder, gifted diagnostics, thematic analysis

1. Introduction

In this exploratory study, I reviewed the multi-faceted debate regarding clarifying giftedness—in terms of disorder. Herein, I also provide analysis of the arguments for and against the clarification of giftedness as a disorder. Giftedness is an important topic in many fields which indicates its prominence as a concern.

First, is important to establish a clear definition of “disorder” in the context of mental health

and intelligence research. In these fields, a disorder is typically defined as a pattern of behaviors, thoughts, or emotions that deviates significantly from what is considered normal or expected for a given individual or population (Feldman & Goldsmith, 1990; National Association for Gifted Children. (2010). The characterization of giftedness as abnormality is supported by a large body of research, including studies that have used factor analysis to identify common symptom clusters that define specific disorders (Widiger et al., 2009), meta-analyses that have demonstrated the reliability and validity of various diagnostic systems (Kraemer et al., 2003), and typologies (Davidson Institute, 2021b; Olszewski-Kubilius, 2011). Moreover, this definition is often operationalized in terms of standard deviations from the mean, with deviations beyond a certain threshold indicating the presence of a disorder. This approach has been widely used in intelligence research to define and diagnose intellectual disability—an intelligence quotient (IQ) score two or more standard deviations below the mean. This describes abnormality though in the other extreme (APA, 2013).

According to the American Psychiatric Association (APA, 2013), “a disorder is a syndrome characterized by clinically significant disturbance in an individual’s cognition, emotion regulation, or behavior that reflects a dysfunction in the psychological, biological, or developmental processes underlying mental functioning” (p. 20). This definition has been widely accepted and used in the field of psychiatry. The DSM is considered to be the standard reference manual used by mental health professionals to diagnose and treat mental health conditions. The DSM provides a comprehensive list of mental disorders, their symptoms, and criteria for diagnosis. However, one area that has long been debated is the classification of giftedness as a disorder (or including it in the DSM as a form of disorder).

2. Method

This evaluation was conducted using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The literature was refined through literature searches with a specific point of combining terms *giftedness* with *mental health disorder*, and *social disorder*; *education and giftedness* with both *success* and *distress* as supplementary terms. The literature represented transdisciplinary and interdisciplinary research that has previously engaged this topic. The literature was carefully broken down into categories such as educational, medical, psychological, and ethnographic. Specific attention was given to the description of giftedness in the context of classification. One exception was the self-description provided through secondary sources of gifted people. These studies amounted to evaluating experience as a form of indirect classification thematically (and naturally) without a need for software-developed coding (e.g., SPSS). The history of the literature contained substantive categorical arguments for both sides. These salient arguments are tabled herein.

3. Results

3.1 Statisticians Play an Integral Role in Definition and Identification

In statistical terms, a disorder can be defined as an extreme or unusual score on a particular trait or behavior that deviates significantly from the normal distribution of that trait or

behavior in a population. For example, if the mean IQ score for the general population is 100 with a standard deviation of 15, an IQ score of 130 or above (i.e., two standard deviations above the mean) would be considered statistically unusual and potentially indicative of giftedness.

However, it may be helpful to note that statistical deviation alone is not enough to diagnose a disorder (Cohen et al. 2009). As the APA definition suggests, there must also be a clinically significant disturbance in cognition, emotion regulation, or behavior that reflects a dysfunction in underlying psychological, biological, or developmental processes. Therefore, when considering giftedness as a disorder, it is important to look not only at statistical deviation but also at the functional impairment (or enhancement) that it may cause in an persons life. For example, research also shown that giftedness can be associated with certain negative outcomes such as social isolation and mental health issues (Ma et al., 2015; Subotnik et al., 2011). Importantly, these outcomes are not necessarily inherent to giftedness itself, but rather can be a result of societal and cultural factors that stigmatize and marginalize gifted individuals (Neihart et al., 2002).

Defining disorder is a complex, multifaceted process that involves both statistical and clinical components (Wideger et al. 2009). While giftedness may meet the statistical criteria for a disorder, one cannot discount the clinical significance and functional impairment or enhancement that it may cause. Moreover, recognizing and addressing any societal and/or cultural factors that contribute to negative outcomes for gifted individuals must be part of the process.

3.2 Arguments for the Inclusion of Giftedness in the DSM

One of the main arguments in favor of the inclusion of giftedness in the DSM is that it would ensure that gifted individuals receive the proper support and resources they need to thrive. Gifted individuals often face unique challenges, such as social isolation, underachievement, and perfectionism. Without proper support, these challenges can lead to mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation (Cross & Cross, 2018; Pfeiffer, 2021). By including giftedness in the DSM, mental health professionals would have a more comprehensive understanding of the mental health needs of gifted individuals, and thus be better equipped to provide the appropriate resources and support (Gross, 2004).

Another argument for the inclusion of giftedness in the DSM is that it would help reduce stigma surrounding giftedness. Gifted individuals are often misunderstood and face negative stereotypes, such as being seen as socially awkward or aloof. By including giftedness in the DSM, it could help normalize the experiences of gifted individuals and reduce the stigma surrounding their abilities (Neihart, 2016).

A tertiary argument is that it would encourage a robust and comprehensive understanding of the link between giftedness, social, and mental health. Research has shown that there is a high correlation between giftedness and mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, and bipolar disorder (Eren et al., 2018). By including giftedness in the DSM, it would help researchers better understand the link between giftedness and mental health and lead to more

effective interventions. During adolescence, all these factors are prone to reduce peer connectedness and school life satisfaction (Guignard, 2021a).

3.3 Arguments Against the Inclusion of Giftedness in the DSM

One of the main arguments against the inclusion of giftedness in the DSM is that it would pathologize a naturally-occurring variation of human ability. Giftedness is not a mental disorder, but rather a normal variation in human ability (Gagne, 2004). By labeling giftedness as a mental disorder, it could lead to further stigmatization and create a focus on deficits rather than strengths.

Another argument against the inclusion of giftedness in the DSM is that the diagnosis could be subjective and lack a standardized definition. It is difficult to measure giftedness, as it is not just about IQ scores but also includes other factors such as creativity and motivation (Plucker & Callahan, 2014). Without a clear and standardized definition of giftedness, it could lead to misdiagnosis and misidentification.

Finally, the inclusion of giftedness in the DSM could divert resources away from those who are truly in need of mental health services. Mental health resources are often limited, and by adding giftedness to the DSM, it could divert resources away from those who have more severe mental health issues.

3.4 Understanding Advocates Against the Inclusion of Giftedness in the DSM

There are several arguments against diagnosing giftedness. One of the main concerns of those who oppose the inclusion of giftedness in the DSM is that it would pathologize a normal variation in human ability. However, it is important to note that the DSM is not just a manual of disorders, but also a guide of mental health diagnostic authority. Another argument is that defining giftedness as a disorder will perpetuate elitism and discrimination. Gifted individuals are already perceived as superior and are given more opportunities, resources, and attention than their peers. Adding giftedness to the DSM may further reinforce this perception, leading to more social inequality and stigmatization of those who are not identified as gifted.

Moreover, there is a concern that labeling giftedness as a disorder could cause harm to the individuals themselves. Gifted individuals are already prone to experiencing feelings of alienation, anxiety, and depression due to their unique experiences and difficulties in fitting in. If these individuals are labeled as having a disorder, they may internalize these negative labels and experience further distress.

Furthermore, some argue that the definition of giftedness is too subjective and lacks scientific rigor. While there are standardized tests that measure intellectual ability, there is no consensus on what constitutes giftedness or how it should be measured. Moreover, there is a concern that individuals who are identified as gifted may not be able to live up to any stereotypical expectations that come with such a label, causing a mismatch between their potential and their actual achievements.

Another argument against diagnosing giftedness is that it may lead to over-diagnosis and over-medication (Frances, 2013). If giftedness is classified as a mental disorder, a

professional might attempt to treat giftedness with medication or therapy, even if the individual does not experience significant impairment or distress. This position, the argument goes, may lead to unnecessary medicalization of normal individual differences and an overreliance on medication as a solution to life's problems.

3.5 Teachers of the Gifted Have Opinions

Placing giftedness in the disorder spectrum has been a topic of debate in the field of psychology and education for many years. While some scholars have argued that giftedness should be considered a disorder due to the high level of intellectual and emotional intensity that gifted individuals experience, others have opined that this label is stigmatizing and focuses on deficits rather than strengths. Regardless of the position one actor adopts, acknowledgement of the challenges and experiences of teachers who work with gifted students in the classroom is of great importance to this debate.

One of the main challenges teachers have been faced with when working with gifted students has been providing appropriate levels of challenge and engagement. Research has shown that gifted students often become bored and disengaged in the classroom when they are not being challenged at a level that is commensurate with their abilities (Kerr et al., 2017). This can lead to behavioral problems, as well as emotional and social issues, such as depression and anxiety (Neihart, 2016), or perceived *anti-sociality*. To address this challenge, teachers must be called upon to differentiate their instruction/curricula and provide opportunities for gifted students to engage in meaningful and challenging activities that meet their needs (breakout.edu, 2022; Kerr, 1991).

Another challenge that teachers face is identifying and serving gifted students who may not fit the traditional profile of giftedness. Giftedness is often associated with high academic achievement and intellectual ability, but gifted students can also be identified by their creativity, leadership skills, and talent in the arts (Renzulli, 2012). However, identifying these students can be challenging, as they may not fit the typical mold of a gifted student. To address this challenge, teachers must be trained in identifying gifted students and providing appropriate services and opportunities to meet their needs.

A third challenge that teachers face is managing the emotional intensity that gifted students often experience (Davidson Institute, 2021b; Davis & Rimm, 2004). Gifted students are known to experience emotional highs and lows, often at a more intense level than their peers (Webb et al., 2007). This can lead to issues such as perfectionism, existential depression, and social isolation (Kerr et al., 2017). Teachers must be trained to recognize the signs of emotional intensity and provide appropriate support and resources to help gifted students manage their emotions.

In addition to these challenges, teachers may also face resistance from parents and colleagues who do not understand or value the needs of gifted students. Gifted students may be seen as elitist or privileged, which can create a hostile environment for teachers who are trying to provide appropriate services and accommodations for these students (Makel et al., 2018). Teachers must be prepared to advocate for their students and educate others about the unique

needs and challenges that gifted students face.

Finally, some argue that giftedness is better viewed as a special educational need, rather than a disorder. Gifted individuals have unique learning needs that require specialized educational opportunities, as opposed to strict medical intervention (even though no literature suggests that, absent comorbid factors). By focusing on providing appropriate education, rather than pathologizing giftedness, people can receive the support needed to reach their full potential without the potential negative consequences of labeling them as a disorder.

Table 1. Thematic range of literature, philosophical distinctions on the classification of giftedness as a disorder

Author, Year	Philosophical Position	Main Argument
Terman, 1925	Medical	Giftedness is a deviation from the norm and may be indicative of underlying neurological or psychological abnormalities
Renzulli, 1978	Educational	Giftedness represents a unique learning profile that requires specialized educational interventions..
Neihart, 2007	Social	The label of giftedness is arbitrary and subjective, and some researchers argue that it simply represents a variation of intelligence
Webb et al., 2013	Medical and Social	Classifying giftedness as a disorder could have negative implications for how society views and treats gifted individuals
Assouline et al., 2015	Educational and Social	Giftedness requires specialized educational interventions, as well as social-emotional support to promote healthy development
Baumeister & Vohs, 2017	Social	Gifted individuals may experience social isolation due to their unique abilities, and it is important to foster positive social connections to support their well-being
Peterson et al., 2018	Medical	Giftedness may be associated with increased risk for certain mental health conditions, such as anxiety and depression

As Table 2 displays, there exists a range of philosophical positions regarding the classification of giftedness as a disorder, including controversial (Terman, 1925), medical, educational, and social perspectives (excluding political). Some have argued that giftedness is a deviation from the norm that may be indicative of underlying neurological or psychological

abnormalities, while others postulated that it represents a unique learning profile that requires specialized educational interventions, or that gifted individuals may experience social and emotional challenges that require support. There are also authors who argue that giftedness can lead to both positive and negative outcomes, and that a focus on deficits rather than strengths could lead to stigmatization. Arguments are not without contradictions and implications (McBee & Makel, 2019).

The difficulties of identifying and addressing giftedness as a disorder in the classroom are not insurmountable. Many teachers have found success in adopting a strengths-based approach to teaching that emphasizes the unique talents and abilities of each student, including those who are gifted. This approach may help shift the focus away from deficits and challenges, and instead highlight the strengths and potential of gifted students. Finally, some authors suggest that gifted individuals may be at increased risk for certain mental health conditions, such as anxiety and depression. These different perspectives highlight the need for a nuanced and multidisciplinary approach to understanding giftedness, and for tailored interventions that address the unique needs of gifted individuals in various domains of their lives.

Table 2. Comparison of Position For and Against Classifying Giftedness as a Disorder

Position	Proponents	Opposition
Statistical	Giftedness represents a deviation from the norm and therefore meets the criteria for a disorder.	Giftedness represents a positive deviation from the norm and labeling it as a disorder could lead to stigmatization and a focus on deficits rather than strengths.
Teacher Perspective	Identifying and meeting the needs of gifted students in the classroom is a significant challenge.	Labeling giftedness as a disorder could lead to stigmatization and a focus on deficits rather than strengths, making it more difficult to meet the needs of gifted students.
Scientific	The nature of giftedness is still a matter of ongoing debate, but some researchers argue that it represents a distinct cognitive profile.	The label of giftedness is arbitrary and subjective, and some researchers argue that it simply represents a variation of intelligence.
Philosophical	The label of disorder is inherently negative and may not be appropriate for giftedness, which is often associated with positive traits and abilities.	Classifying giftedness as a disorder could have negative implications for how society views and treats gifted individuals.
The Gifted	Reflect high distress and inability to adjust to societal norms	Will damage their emotional well-being and esteem

However, teachers must be given training and resources to help them identify and support gifted students effectively. This includes knowledge of giftedness and its associated challenges, as well as strategies for differentiation and enrichment in the classroom. Teachers must also be equipped with appropriate assessment tools to identify giftedness accurately and early on. The gifted themselves express varied distresses (Jones, 2013; Silverman, 1998; Wells, 2017).

4. Discussion

While the concept of giftedness as a disorder is controversial, there is expansive evidence to support its inclusion in the DSM in the future, particularly in the statistical and gifted perspectives. Acknowledging this could help increase awareness, understanding, and support for gifted individuals, including children in the classroom as teachers play a vital role in identifying and supporting gifted students, and must be provided with the necessary training and resources to do so effectively (Castellano, 2004). However, this idea must be balanced with a cautious approach that avoids stigmatization and negative labelling as indicated by the other three themes.

The general question of whether giftedness is more accurately described as a disorder (or be included in the DSM) is rather complex, with valid arguments on both sides. While including giftedness in the DSM may increase recognition of the unique challenges that gifted individuals face (Ma et al., 2015), labeling may also lead to stigmatization and perpetuate social inequality, which has dubious bases in at least one study covering a country (Guignard et al., 2021). This does not suggest or espouse that giftedness and comorbidity is absolutely prominent *or not*, as similar to *twice-exceptional* positions (Amend et al., 2009; Baum et al., 1991) only that it may likely devolve that way as a result of not addressing the potential confusion. For example, giftedness could be characterized as a *disorder non-illness* (DNI) and as a *disorder underlying-illness* (DUNI) where comorbidity is present. This would provide distinction that has considered and negated some labeling effects contributing to perceived stigma.

Ultimately, transdisciplinary factors must inform giftedness identification and/or diagnoses that recognizes the strengths and challenges of gifted individuals while underscoring necessity of appropriate support and resources to help them thrive (Subtonic et al., 2011). A misdiagnosed, unidentified, or non-diagnosed person (Mendaglio & Peterson, 2002; Webb et al., 2005) could very well end up imprisoned, exploited, or worst: dead (e.g., Jimi Hendrix, Tupac Shakur, Jim Morrison, Kurt Cobain). Additionally, Kraemer (2003) has described both sensitivity and specificity concerns related to diagnosing disorders that are informative.

Finally, in contention with Ansbacher (1992), giftedness is not a disorder society would want to prevent, a truth that diminishes the strength of 'stigmatizing labeling effects' and encouraging social acceptance (See systematic analysis by Schlegler, 2022 for careful distinctions between gifted people). The bottom line is society has an interest in properly defining the categories of persons who need to have unique access to resources based sound policy and actions from the government. If we look to what the gifted have stated, they clearly feel disordered and desire deserved instruction, resources, and awareness about their

condition.

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