

Exploring self-concept among gifted children through analysis of the movie Gifted

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Abstract: This present paper aims to explore the theory of “self-concept” through the analysis of the movie Gifted (Webb, 2017). The paper discusses the impact of movies on shaping perceptions of the general masses. It describes the alliance between psychology and media and how the relationship between the two is interwoven and highlights the role of media in forming the stereotypes and its generalisation around various psychological concepts. It aims to bring forward the hardships faced by gifted children and their caretakers. The paper revolves around various themes emerging from the movie including the suitability of gifted programs in schools for such children with this rare behaviour. It also highlights how the expectations from family and society can result in damaging their self-esteem in many ways.

Keywords: Gifted; Media; Rare-behaviour; Self-concept; Caretakers.

Rare behaviour is behaviour that significantly deviates from statistical or societal norms. The definition of such behaviour is culturally sensitive and what is considered rare behaviour in one culture may not be rare in another, because different cultures around the world have different practices and norms. Some statistically unusual behaviours can be maladaptive in nature and be considered undesirable such as having a lower IQ or holding uncommon beliefs. In contrast, other rare behaviours might be desirable and considered an asset such as a higher-than-average IQ, in 'gifted' children. It is a universal human desire to be born *gifted*, as being *gifted* is synonymous with superior performance and achievements than one's peers. But most of us do not realise the kind of adversities that are accompanied by this rare human trait.

The National Association of Gifted Children (NAGC) defines “giftedness” as “an ability to demonstrate outstanding levels of aptitude (defined as an exceptional ability to reason and learn) or competence (documented performance or achievement in top 10% or rarer) in one or more domains. The earlier definitions of giftedness have centered around intelligence and creativity, but now the concept has evolved with time because of several researches (e.g., Carman, 2013; Cross & Cross, 2019; Kaufman & Stenberg, 2008; Stoecker, 2009). At times

giftedness is equated with high IQ, creativity, talent, and multiple skills but due to the varying cultural norms and lack of a unified theoretical view, there is no standard way to define it. Mostly giftedness is displayed during early childhood and it might take numerous forms. Some individuals are globally gifted whereas others are gifted in specific domains, such as in academics, sports, music, or specific academic fields, hence gifted children are associated with a wide range of talents, aptitudes, abilities, and skills (Daniels & McCollin, 2010)

The concept of giftedness is often brought forth through several Hollywood movies featuring both gifted kids and adults in diverse ways, yet commonly highlighting the eulogizing light they stand in, often alienated from their peers. While *Shine* (Hicks, 2006) and *The Greatest Showman* (Gracey, 2017) feature musical prodigies, intellectual paragons with exceptional mathematical abilities are the focus of films like Gifted (Webb, 2017). Bollywood does not stand too far away in terms of the portrayal of the concept of giftedness, and a movie called *Three Idiots* (Hirani, 2009) has been enjoyed by the audience, reflected by its success.

Media and psychology have a long-standing partnership, with audio-visual resources like movies

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playing a crucial role in portraying psychological concepts and spreading awareness about mental health issues. The effective use of these resources is associated with enhanced imagination, increased attention span, active learning and enhanced emotional and cognitive responses (Rasul, Bukhsh, & Batool, 2011; Perciful & Meyer, 2016) making them valuable in various fields such as healthcare training, counseling, therapy, classroom education, marketing, and advertising. However, media can also perpetuate prevalent stereotypes (Mastro, Behm-Morawitz, & Kopacz, 2008), leading to misinterpretations of marginalized groups (Yuen, 2016; Rider, 1994). Accurate portrayal of characters can encourage a positive attitude towards those belonging to the same minority groups as media-based strategies have been effective in reducing racial and gender stereotypes and reducing homophobia (Ramasubramaniam, 2007; Madžarević & Soto-Sanfiel, 2018). Additionally, media has a significant role in shaping audiences' perceptions of gifted children, setting standards for behavioural and cognitive traits. Stereotypic representations in newspapers contribute to stigmatization, while evidence-based representations can help destigmatize them (Bergold, Hastall, & Steinmayr, 2021). Inaccurate portrayals in films can lead to negative attitudes and decreased self-esteem, affecting gifted young people's social functioning and self-esteem which leads to behavioural problems (Eren, Çete, Avcıl, & Baykara, 2018). Vialle (2007) found that gifted young people are often stereotypically portrayed in films as non-sporting, female, and unpopular, in undesirable settings populated with obnoxious characters. Studies (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorelli, 2002; Nabi & Riddle, 2008) also confirm media's effectiveness in changing attitudes towards gifted children, attributed to cultivation and identification, shaping perceptions, beliefs, attitudes, and values.

Why *Gifted*?

While the movie *Gifted* primarily explores Mary's family dynamics, it also unveils stereotypical perceptions of gifted kids by their families, teachers and societies which puts them under pressure to meet those expectations and live up to the standards set by others while neglecting their own emotional needs. It depicts well the lack of understanding on caregiver's

part regarding emotional development who see them just as an achievement and an extension of themselves to make them proud rather than a separate human being with their own needs and thoughts. As a result, many gifted children end up suffering the consequences of the lack of proper emotional and academic support, such as burnout and depression. If psychological assistance is not provided on time, it may lead them to suicide, as in the case of "*Diane Adler*", Mary's mother. The movie is informational in that aspect and stresses the need for balance between providing a 'normal' childhood and nurturing gifted abilities. While many movies featuring gifted characters tend to be stereotypical in portraying gifted children as one-dimensional oddities, typically closed off, socially awkward and introverted with undesirable physical qualities with glasses on at all times, *Gifted* diverges from this pool of movies and presents the gifted child prodigy with slightly more accurate characteristics.

Objective

Through the use of audio/visual material, the objective of the study is to analyze the movie *Gifted* and explore the following themes:

1. Shaping of self-concept through parental, societal, and family influence.
2. The overall impact of specialized programs.
3. Depression in gifted children and their caregivers.

Method

Gifted is a 2017 movie directed by Marc Webb which revolves around a seven-year-old child prodigy with extraordinary mathematical abilities and her uncle Frank, a boat mechanic in Florida. The movie explores the challenges that come with raising a gifted child through themes of family dynamics and academics and presents the dilemma of harnessing gifted abilities at the cost of conventional childhood for the benefit of society or letting children have childhood, like peers their age. It begins with Mary Adler, gifted in mathematics, starting her first day of school with much disinterest as she is opposed to the idea of attending a regular school. She would rather be homeschooled, reasoning that she has no interest in being friends with her classmates as she is content being friends with her next-door neighbour Roberta and her one-eyed cat, Fred. Mary's personality is a blend of confidence,

intelligence, and empathy, showcased throughout the movie as she navigates complex ideas and brings unique perspectives to situations. Her innate curiosity is responsible for her being an engaging conversationalist and on many accounts, Frank can be seen talking to her like an adult rather than a child. Their dynamic is best reflected when the two converse about the existence of God, in which rather than taking the easy route and affirming belief in God, Frank explains the difference between faith based on emotions and feelings as opposed to facts, and hence no one knows if God exists. On multiple occasions, Mary's unwavering confidence and ability to stand up for herself and others has also been witnessed.

However, with *Evelyn's* (Mary's grandmother) introduction, a custody battle between the son and mother sets off, letting Mary's future be divided into two different paths, one by her Uncle Frank who wishes she attends school with her non-gifted peers. Evelyn sees this as a hindrance in her progress to achieving full potential like her mother Diane and sets the second path to enrol her into a gifted program instead. Evelyn's background is of importance here as it also sheds light onto the reason for her persistence to uproot Mary from the life she has been living so far to raise her like Diane, Mary's mother. In the film, she is seen reminiscing about the time she spent as a math researcher which gets exchanged in turn for a husband and two children, one of whom turns out to be a gifted math prodigy and eventually serves as an instrument for her to live her dreams through. Unfortunately, for Diane, the pressure put by her mother to focus on her studies leaves her isolated from the rest of the world and questions her existence and worth which quickly escalates into her attempting suicide. Afraid that Mary might go down the same path, he quits his job and comes to Florida, away from his controlling mother.

Analysis

The qualitative study was based on thematic analysis of

the movie *Gifted* following the six-step process given by Clarke and Braun (2016): familiarization, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing up. After watching the movie multiple times to get familiarized, characters were closely analyzed individually and with relation to their environment to identify recurring psychological themes: Giftedness in children as well as adults, the self-concept in gifted children, depression in gifted children and their caregivers and the impact of gifted programs on children which were then used to formulate research questions. Based on the discovered themes, a coding system was created to analyse the film using theoretical framework from various theories such as Cooley's looking-glass self-theory (1902) and self-concept as given by Rogers (1959) and characters are examined to formulate subject matter. Related studies were found and used to support the current findings of the study.

Mary Adler and Frank Adler were the main characters analyzed in relation to each other, as well as other characters such as Mary's grandmother and her mother, Diane Adler. The emergent themes were noted in detail, following a latent level analysis and supporting evidence from specific scenes, dialogues and character interactions based on actors' performances, facial expressions, and body language was also added, followed by categorizing and organizing the data through coding. Audience responses of the movie's themes and messages were also taken into consideration. A thorough analysis of the coded data was done to explore the interconnections between the emergent themes and draw insights from their patterns and variations. This analysis is conducted without the constraints of predetermined theoretical frameworks, allowing for a more exploratory and flexible interpretation of the movie's psychological dimensions.

Figure 1

Themes uncovered from the movie Gifted

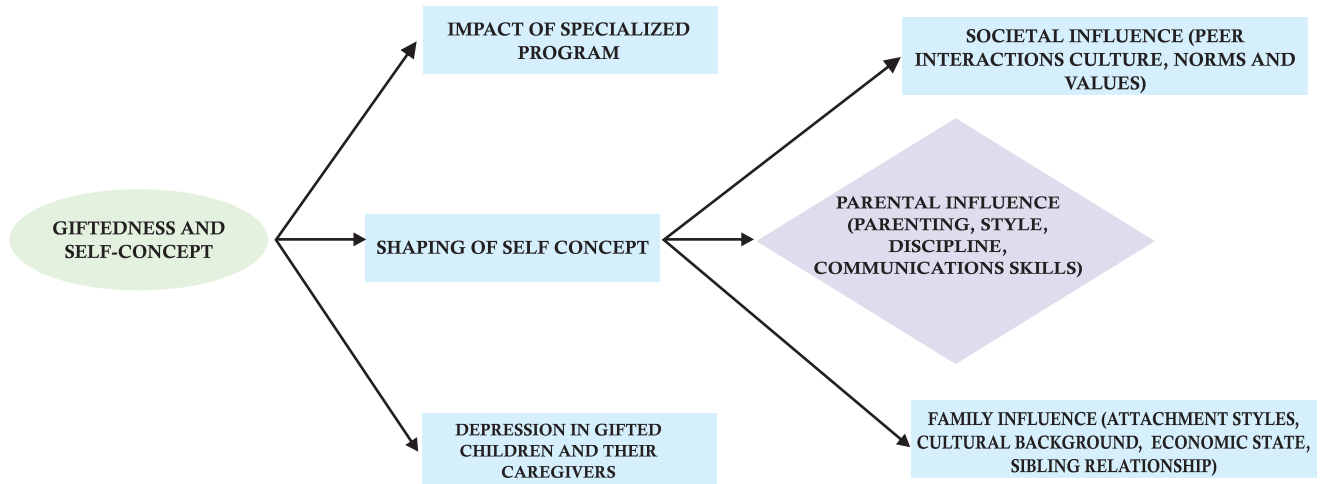


Table 1:

Thematic analysis of movie Gifted

Theme	Sub-themes	Codes
Self-Concept in gifted children	Shaping of self-concept through parental, societal, and family influence	Contrast between self-esteem in two different situations with two different caregivers.
	Depression in gifted children and their caregivers	Exhibition of depressive symptoms (withdrawal, feelings of sadness and inadequacy, crying)
	The overall impact of specialized gifted programs	
		Benefits and Drawbacks of gifted programs

Result and Discussion

An examination of the movie's plot, characters, and their portrayal uncovered the following themes below:

Shaping of self-concept by parental, societal, and family influence

Central to humanistic psychology, self-concept refers to an individual's perception, evaluation, and

understanding of themselves based on several factors such as personal experience, social interaction, and cultural influences and plays a role in governing behaviour and emotions while often tied to self-image and self-esteem. Baumeister (1999) defines self-concept as "The individual's belief about himself or herself, including the person's attributes and who and what the self is". Lewis (1990) presents two aspects of self, i.e. existential and categorical. Relationships and early experiences with caregivers primarily shape the development of children's self-concept. Between six

and nine months of age, children begin to recognize themselves as separate people and not a part of their caregivers, marking the first form of self-concept. This reportedly evolves and develops such that children demonstrate self-recognition, awareness of their characteristics, and identification of feelings and preferences whilst seeking out social interactions.

Mary Adler's self-concept evolves throughout the story as she navigates the intricate circumstances surrounding her family and academics. Initially, Mary is homeschooled by her uncle Frank, rather unconventionally because of her exceptional communication skills and extraordinary mathematical abilities by encouraging her to make decisions for herself and setting a stage to explore interests enthusiastically without judgments. Furthermore, he communicates well with her as shown by him expressing his disappointment when she yells at the Principal on her first day, which shapes a positive self-concept.

Fostering a positive self-concept in children is essential for establishing healthy relationships with parents and peers (Myers-Walls, Hinkley, & Reid, 2017). It also encourages a positive outlook regarding the future and results in high self-esteem and confidence which is reflected in the movie through relationships between her and Frank as well as Roberta. Mary's confidence is unwavering when she stands up for her classmate against twelve-year-old bullies responsible for tripping the classmate down to ruin his art project. Several studies show that gifted children have a higher self-concept (general and academic self-concept) as compared to their non-gifted peers (Infantes-Paniagua et al, 2022; Hoge & Renzulli, 1993), often reflected in adulatory confidence, ever-increasing curiosity and the ability to explore new situations assertively.

Apart from parental influence, interactions with friends and society are eminent in shaping the self-concept (Janos, Fung, & Robinson, 1985). Cooley's looking glass theory emphasizes the role of social interaction in shaping an individual's identity, stating that "the concept of self or one's sense of identity comes not only from direct contemplation of themselves, or the personal qualities but also from the examination of the way one is perceived by others in

the society" (Cooley, 1902). In a social situation, an individual visualizes how others perceive and make judgments based on those perceptions which either upholds their self-image or and then responds to those judgements positively or negatively. Negative feedback impacts self-concepts negatively whereas positive leads to a pleasing impact on self-concept accompanied by increase in self-confidence and an assured self-identity. Mary's interactions in the movie are limited to Frank and Roberta as she does not have interest in making friends her age as she finds them boring. However, both the interactions in the movie nurture a positive attitude towards self and encourage her to explore her own capabilities. Later, when she finds out that her biological father did not try to reach out to her despite living in the same state, she states feeling undesirable and questions if it is because she is not "good enough" for him. At the end of the movie, Mary once again encounters a new social situation in the form of girl scouts but adjusts quite well and is seen playing with her friends which shows that she has a high self-concept. It is noteworthy that in the classroom, Mary does not falter when her teacher challenges her by asking complex mathematical questions when she appears bored and uninterested in the class activities. This gives the impression that she is self-assured in her abilities which derives from the fact, again, that gifted children have higher self-esteem than their non-gifted peers apart from being more emotionally intelligent.

Depression in gifted children and their caregivers

Children who are gifted are usually characterized as more intense, sensitive, and idealistic; they can see the contradictions and absurdities in the values and behaviors of others (Beljan et al., 2006). They are more likely to question the nature and purpose of their lives and the lives of those around them because of sensitive awareness and idealism. They become keenly aware of their smallness in the larger picture of existence and they feel helpless to fix the many problems that trouble them. Gifted children are hence more likely than those who are less gifted to experience spontaneous existential depression as a result of their mental and emotional abilities and interactions with others. A similar emotional state could be observed in *Diane* as well, who committed suicide after finding a solution to a popular one of the seven millennium problems, the Navier-Stokes equation which can be attributed to her

centering the purpose of her life to the solution of the popular maths problem. Meanwhile, Mary does not suffer from existential depression in the movie but does not fail to question the existence of those around her, including God.

In general, gifted kids exhibit more depressive symptoms than their peers (Eren, Çete, Avcıl, & Baykara, 2018). They are more likely to be excluded from social groups they belong to and consequently experience isolation and loneliness due to intellectual differences. Researchers (Gross & Feldhusen, 1990; Roberts & Lovett, 1994; Roedell, 1984; Silverman, 1993) have suggested that because gifted children deviate from the norm and have heightened responses, they are more likely to experience unusual social and emotional challenges. Super-sensitivity, perfectionism, and differences in intellectual, emotional, and social domains are among the factors that contribute to these unusual challenges (Winsor & Mueller, 2020). Historical evidence also amounts to the fact that gifted children have experienced clinical depression in the past, though they might disguise symptoms for various reasons. (Jackson & Peterson, 2003). In the movie, Mary is isolated from her peers twice, once when she is being homeschooled by Frank and the second time when her grandmother hires a tutor for her but the conditions both times were extremely different. As opposed to the encouragement and love provided by Frank which does not affect her negatively, the isolated environment provided to her (putting her pet cat for adoption) by her grandmother is rather overwhelming and distressing, as exhibited by her bursting into tears as soon as she sees Frank and wishes to go home. The short time she spends at the primary school can be highlighted by outbursts and unwillingness to make friends. While this is not indicative of depressive behaviour in the clinical sense, Mary seems to struggle with feelings of loneliness (her only friend being next-door neighbours Roberta) and is often vulnerable at times. It also highlights behavioural problems experienced by gifted children. Diane's struggles with mental health, implied through flashbacks and her strained relationship with her mother and boyfriend also reveals depression in gifted children, if left untreated, can worsen over time which contributed to her tragic end.

Research on caregivers of gifted children experiencing clinical depression is limited, though they may be prone to developing depression due to various stressors, such as the need to meet high expectations that come with raising a gifted child and navigating educational systems that do not properly manage the gifted education system, failing to accommodate their needs (Mascher, 2021). They may also experience social isolation as other parents do not share common problems with them that may come with raising a gifted child. A similar situation was faced by Mary's uncle Frank, who was seen struggling to give a fulfilling upbringing to Mary as her peers. Throughout the film, Frank's depression can be seen through his body language, inability to make genuine connections, romantic and otherwise with other people and feelings of sadness. The choice of whether to let Mary be with her peers or enroll into a gifted program is a burdening responsibility. At times, signs of burnout can be noticed where he feels powerless.

The overall impact of specialized gifted programs

Frank, concerned about Mary's social and emotional need which are generally not fulfilled due to poor management of Gifted and Talented programs and other factors which contribute to predisposition of mental disorders in gifted children, enrolls her into a community school where she attends lessons with her non-gifted peers, which can be characterized by boredom, frustration as she talks rudely to teachers as well as principle and withdraws from classroom activities purposely, and it's only after the custody battle, Mary is seen attending the Oaks college with other older students. Gifted children enrolled in regular school programs withdraw into themselves and have only a few friends. They may be bored with their schoolwork, become frustrated and discouraged, and may deliberately underachieve to make themselves acceptable to their classmates (Aziz et al., 2021). Diane's attendance in gifted program proves to be disadvantageous to her mental health due to mismanagement and authoritarian parenting style (Baumrind, 1999) of Evelyn who makes it clear that sole purpose of her daughter's life is to work on the Navier-Stokes equation, and in progress sets clear expectations regarding how her life should unfold and restrictions on things that are "distracting." Participation in the gifted program has mixed effects on

students' self-concept. On the one hand, research reveals that while a lot also depends on other factors, being a part of the gifted programs influences students' self-concept, their self-esteem and self-image (Hertzog, 2003). Studies aimed at exploring influence of gifted and talented programs on student's self-concept reveal that post enrolment, gifted children develop an elevated sense of self perception and an increase in self-concept because of their awareness that the program is highly competitive and admired (Kalaji & Alborn, 2022). On the other hand, other researchers have shown the *Big-Fish-Little-Pond (BFLP)* effect which predicts that academic self-concept is lower in gifted children enrolled in higher achieving programs as compared to lower achieving programs. Hence, the more competitive a gifted program is, the worse students tend to feel about their academic achievements which reflects poorly on their self-concept. A review of the effects of gifted and talented programs on academic self-concept showed a decline in three components of academic self-concept over time but did not affect non-academic self-concept (Marsh, Chessor, Craven, & Roche, 1995; Tokmak, Sak, & Akbulut, 2021).

Limitations and Implications for further research

The study utilizes a secondary source of data for analysis. It also presents analysis of only one movie for studying giftedness which limits generalization to other children. Moreover, the focus of the movie is not psychological so it does not cover theories or topics in depth. More case studies in different age, socio-economic background and ethnicity may be analyzed for a more nuanced understanding. Further, utilizing primary sources such as surveys and observation ensures original insights and hence, increases the depth.

Conclusion

Giftedness is the ability to demonstrate outstanding levels of aptitude or competence in one or more domains. The objective of the study was to analyze the movie *Gifted* and explore different psychological themes emerging from the parental, societal, and family influence on socio-emotional development in gifted children and their caregivers using audio/visual aids which highlighted important themes. Interplay between the environment, societal expectation and

giftedness shapes the self-concept of Mary, a gifted seven-year-old prodigy and throws light on the profound impact of the relationship between self-concept, self-esteem and depression which influences other domains of life such as relationship with peers, caregivers and familial relationships and vice versa. The movie steers away from the stereotypical representation of gifted children in media to more accurately portray the struggles of gifted children such as isolation, loneliness, academic expectation through Mary. The portrayal of depression highlights the vulnerability of gifted children and the need for early intervention and mental health resources within educational settings.

The movie also emphasizes the importance of the role of caregivers and educational systems in supporting the socio-emotional needs of gifted children. Frank's struggle to balance Mary's intellectual needs with her emotional well-being as well as his own highlights the importance of having support systems for gifted individuals, such as gifted programs and for their caregivers as well.

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