

## ABSTRACT

### Gifted late adolescent males experiencing and coping with emotional overexcitability

By

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(Under the direction of Thomas P. Hébert)

Emotional overexcitability is a characteristic of gifted individuals. Because of the feminine attributes of high emotionality, however, emotional overexcitability can be problematic for males, particularly those in late adolescence who are dealing with individuation and identity concerns. Studies on emotional overexcitability have not addressed the population of late adolescent males -- ages 19-25. We have not heard the voices of this particular population to know what their experience of this overexcitability is like. We are also unaware of how they cope with this overexcitability given the propensity to hide their emotionality. This study examines both of these issues to give a more complete picture of the experience and coping strategies of gifted, late adolescent males. The findings indicate that all five participants had intense emotional experiences that seemed to bring about depression, loneliness, self-berating behavior and being overwhelmed. Coping strategies included detachment, spiritual experiences and using methods that capitalized on their other overexcitability strengths. Implications for parents, teachers and counselors of gifted adolescent males are presented.

**KEY WORDS:** emotional overexcitability, late adolescent males, androgyny, depression, loneliness, detachment, perfectionism, masochism, emotion-focused coping.

GIFTED LATE ADOLESCENT MALES EXPERIENCING AND COPING WITH  
EMOTIONAL OVEREXCITABILITY

By

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

While working with a High School Odyssey of the Mind (OM) team, I made a suggestion that the students stop worrying about what their friends would say about their involvement in the program. I recoiled as one senior male student lashed out at me and said “Why don’t you give up your life as you know it?” He was normally an enthusiastic participant in our brain storming sessions, but something had obviously happened to shake his faith in himself.

When I asked him what had happened, he explained that when people found out he was doing OM they ridiculed him for participating in an activity that was known to be for the gifted. He had carefully crafted a place for himself among his peers and when his OM participation became known, that place was taken away. This left him with a life that had drastically changed in his social status.

My nineteen-year-old son was constantly distancing himself from the family by spending all his free time shut off alone in his room. I would try to question him as he came home from school, but was often given the quick and painful answer of, “They just don’t get me.”

When I followed him to his room to get more of a response, I found him beating up his bed and crying inconsolably. Upon repeated questioning, he finally gave me his view of school. He wasn’t getting good grades because he feared that would totally alienate him from his peers. He took on the role of class clown, but his intellectually obscure humor fell on uncomprehending ears. His classmates weren’t laughing with him; they were laughing at him.



Both young men, poised at the brink of late adolescence, were questioning their identity in relation to their peers. Each was highly gifted and emotionally expressive, and each was suffering from private humiliations. One lashed out, one retreated. I ached for each of them as each had, on separate occasions, spoken to me so eloquently about his need to be in a relationship where he didn't have to hide how he felt. As extremely emotional young men, their self-identity was in jeopardy of being ridiculed if they chose to embrace their emotionality. Lashing out and retreating were initial ways they chose to cope with this ridicule. But were there subsequent coping steps they could and would take to be able to embrace their true identity?

I frequently observed the torment that extreme emotionality inflicted on young men. When they were moved to try to console a peer, they were often criticized for being "too soft." When they became passionate about an idea, they were labeled as "going off the deep end." There didn't seem to be a middle ground. Extremes of emotions were commonplace and hard to hide, unless one chose to resist his essence and put on the mask of the more unemotional classmates. Their only way to fit in seemed to be to deny themselves. Yet denying intrinsic values exacted a cost. These young men were trying to lose themselves in order to blend in with the crowd.

Observing these young men caused me to ask some basic questions. What was it like to be an emotionally overexcitable young man? Were there ways in which these young men could embrace their emotionality and still fit in enough to be part of a group?

These were the questions I was asking myself as I began the study of gifted education and creativity. During this study, the introduction of Kazmirez Dabrowski's (1964) Theory of Positive Disintegration (TPD) immediately caught my attention.

Dabrowski outlined five areas of overexcitability that are often experienced by the gifted, with the most salient being emotional overexcitability. I read with a profound understanding as he referred to the intense relationships experienced by the emotionally overexcitable. He talked of their deep sensitivity to perceived slights, and their extreme attachment to people, places and things (Piechowski, 1975). I had observed instances of all these issues in my OM students and in my own five gifted children. But they seemed particularly problematic for the late adolescent gifted male. It seemed that the “boy code” (Pollack, 1998) prohibiting them from showing emotion was causing them great internal turmoil.

I am a gifted individual very high in emotional overexcitability. When I first encountered the characteristics of emotional overexcitability, I found for the first time in my life an explanation for why I had felt the way I had, and why I continued to feel intensely. Late adolescence was a particularly difficult time for me. Although in the U.S. a female is culturally allowed to express emotions freely, I was raised more like a male. When I expressed intense emotions, I was criticized by my parents for being overly dramatic and subject to ridicule. As a result, I stopped expressing my emotions. In my efforts to cope with repressed feelings, I utilized alcohol, drugs, self-mutilation, and anorexia.

Alcohol was a learned response, as both my parents and paternal grandparents were alcoholics. I was told that my alcoholism was a result of genetics. I never believed that, as I was aware of consciously choosing to obliterate my feelings with alcohol. When I read about emotional overexcitability, and realized that that could be inherited (as

intelligence is a heritable trait), then the alcohol as a coping trait of emotional overexcitability made sense.

I had observed many examples of emotional overexcitability in my young children, before they started to mask the condition. Once I found my three-year-old son sitting on the bottom step of a flight of stairs. He was crying vigorously and openly, clearly in great distress. When I asked him what was wrong, he managed to choke out the words, “I miss Blue Bomber.” When I asked who “Blue Bomber” was, having never heard the name before, he again choked out the words between sobs, “Our old car.” Our old navy blue Ford Grand Lemans had been towed away on the previous day and a new car stood in its place. Not only had the old car been breaking down frequently, it “smelled funny” as young passengers in the car often told me. Yet my son had gone so far as to name the old wreck and now was sobbing as if he had lost a life-long friend. This mourning continued for several days.

My four-year-old daughter was absolutely enthralled with a kangaroo suit I had made her for Halloween. In the spring following the holiday she still wore the suit daily when she came home from pre-school. She would put Fisher Price little people in the pouch and hop around the house carrying them to their next destination. Friends would come over and ask her to take the costume off, but she would stubbornly refuse. She would put a pink tulle tutu on over the kangaroo suit when friends wanted to play dress up. She didn’t think of the kangaroo as a costume. She had made it part of her identity and no amount of cajoling on the part of her peers could make her relinquish that identity.

Another seven-year-old son was particularly concerned with the lady who lived alone across the street. Most children avoided going near the house. She was an

alcoholic, which was unknown by my son, but because of her condition she was somewhat frightening to look at. Her gray hair stood out from her thin face as if windblown. Her small frame was emaciated from being on a primarily liquid diet. Although she loved children, many were too afraid of her looks and her old, sprawling three-story house to approach her.

My son felt differently. He would walk across the street to her house full of purpose. He would ascend the long front staircase confidently, with his latest piano piece clutched in his hand. He would ring the bell, Milda would let him in the front door, and he would go into the musty old house. After some small talk about what was happening at school, my son would climb onto the piano bench that stood in the corner of the large living room, and play his selected music. Then Milda would bring out anise cookies, which my son abhorred, and they would chat for a little while longer. He followed this pattern religiously, week after week, much to his friends' and my amazement. He had found someone that he thought had a need for him. He was determined to meet that need.

Emotional overexcitability was very evident in my young children. At times it seemed as if it held them in a vise-like grip with no chance for escape when the emotions were too raw. But all in all they seemed happy to be intensely emotional, and driven by these emotions. These same emotions were the cause of much embarrassment for my late adolescent children, particularly my sons. In a culture that defines masculinity as being tough and emotionally distant, my sons seemed in a dire condition when it came to trying to present a masculine image.

My children embodied Dabrowski's view of emotional overexcitability. They showed strong emotional attachment to people and things. They had a great sensitivity in

their relationships. They had moments of euphoria, but could then fall into deep depressions. From a very young age they seemed destined to live on an emotional roller coaster.

As I sought to determine the specific direction my research would take, I read many articles and essays related to Dabrowski's theory and the related overexcitabilities, particularly emotional overexcitability. The articles dealt with people of all age groups, but all were gifted individuals. Berndt, Kaiser and Van Aalst (1982) conducted a qualitative study that suggested that gifted adolescents should be guided to self-actualization in order to avoid depression. This was consistent with a study by Benge and Montgomery (1996) who found that adolescents who want to move forward in personal development need to face their inner turmoil rather than trying to assuage it. This seems to speak to the issue of how one copes with emotional overexcitability.

Both Piechowski and Colangelo (1984) and Tucker and Hafenstein (1997) conducted studies that implied that the presence of high overexcitability might be a good indicator of giftedness.

Brennan and Piechowski (1987) conducted a strategic case study analysis of four adults (age 38-58) who had been nominated as individuals who were engaged in the process of self-growth at a multi-level stage (Dabrowski, 1964). Three similar characteristics among all participants emerged: feeling different, feeling affectively undernourished, and having experienced an emotional disruption during their lives. These strategic developmental experiences were remembered from late adolescence.

Piechowski's (2006) recent book catalogues the responses of gifted adolescents to an overexcitabilities questionnaire, particularly those adolescents who experience

emotional overexcitability. Piechowski admitted in his book that “bright young males especially are caught between conflicting pressures to prove their masculinity -- which means pursuing athletics, girls and acting cool-- and being expected to develop their gifts” (p.179). He also refers to Pollack’s (1998) *Real Boys* and the fact that the social Boy Code pressures boys to be tough, competitive and non-feminine. These references indicate that emotional demonstrativeness may be a bigger problem for males.

Pollack (1998) had many observations about why boys in general grow up to be tough and masculine. He found that boys frequently were made to feel shame because of their feelings of longing for emotional connections. As a result of this shame and subverted longing, adolescent boys turn to anger (the one emotion they are allowed to express) and wild mood swings. They are in an emotional disconnect. This also happens as a result of the early separation that they are expected to achieve in relation to their mothers. This causes a blow to self-esteem and in some cases results in clinical depression.

Kerr and Cohn (2001) highlighted adolescent depression in their book *Smart Boys*. Highly creative, highly gifted boys are an at-risk group for many reasons. One is their sensitivity and intensity. They are also often socially isolated because of their non-conforming behavior. These boys also believe that they have no one to turn to in times of stress. Gifted gay and bisexual boys may be at very high risk for depression and suicide. In short, gifted adolescent boys have a very tumultuous road to travel largely because they are isolated and repressed from free expression of their emotions.

There exists a gap in the literature when trying to find the experience of emotional overexcitability in the period between adolescence and adulthood, a period known as *late*

*adolescence* that encompasses ages 19-26. Males in late adolescence, in particular, are thwarted from expressing their emotionality (Gurian, 1997, 1998, Kerr & Cohen, 2001, Piechowski, 2006, Pollack, 1998) and may be prevented from achieving higher levels of development as a result. This suppression of emotions, Benge and Montgomery (1996) argue, can lead to depression. Neither is there any literature on how late adolescent males cope with emotional overexcitability. This seems to open up an area for study.

I have chosen to investigate gifted late adolescent males for several reasons. I have firsthand knowledge of how emotionality in general affects this target population. I coached Odyssey of the Mind with this target population for four years, and had quite a few young men who were high in emotional overexcitability. I am also the mother of four males, two who have passed through late adolescence and two currently in their adolescence. I previously conducted a pilot study looking at two males in the target population. I am particularly interested in exploring emotionality in this population because in late adolescence, participants have the emotional maturity to be self-reflective and they are at a time in their lives when identity and career choices are vying for their attention. It is a turbulent time that immediately follows the tumultuous teen years. For gifted individuals, it is a time when they are most likely to strive for self-actualization.

It is thus particularly significant to look at the gifted late adolescent population. Because of their extended dependence on families for economic support, they are still in the process of individuation. Because of their multipotentiality, they are often still trying to decide on a career path and this, in turn, thwarts some of their identity development. In short, they are still in the throes of major developmental tasks but are at an age at which, for males, seeking support from others does not seem to be a viable option.

This is a topic about which I am very passionate. There are very valid reasons for studying what one has a passion for, even when the theoretical framework that supports the method states that one must come to the data without presuppositions. Goethe (1963) stated that “one learns to know only what one loves, and the deeper and fuller the knowledge is to be, the more powerful and vivid must be the love, indeed the passion” (p.83).

I have lived through emotional experiences of my own as well as those of my sons. I have watched in alternate pleasure and dismay at the methods that they have used to cope with these experiences. In so saying, it would seem that I would have preconceived notions of how one experiences and copes with emotional overexcitability. However, I have also seen that there were variations among my sons that made the experience and coping strategies of each unique. This gave me a broad perspective with which to approach my topic. The passion I have for the topic served me well in being empathetic to the participants, in both collecting and reflecting upon their experiences.

Late adolescents are at a critical juncture in their development. If they are gifted, they must face their emotional overexcitability and try to negotiate between cultural demands to be more masculine, and internal demands to be more androgynous. This requires significant skills in coping. But many of these young men do not see turning to another for help as an option.

The purpose of this study is to add to the understanding of the problems these young men face as a means of helping parents, educators and eventually the young men themselves to improve their coping strategies.

The overarching questions guiding my inquiry are:



- 1) How do late adolescent males experience emotional overexcitability?
- 2) How do these males then cope with the emotional overexcitability that they feel?

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This study aims to examine a very particular time of life: adolescence. It is presumed that the reactions to normal life changes will be greater than the norm as the particular participants chosen are high in emotional overexcitability. Thus, it is important to understand normal late adolescent psychology in order to compare that with a presumed abnormally high intensity late adolescent psychology.

Since this study also focuses on the gifted late adolescent male, it is equally important to examine previous studies that have been conducted on this specific population and to investigate their possible bearing on this study

The participants in this study were selected based on a criterion of high emotional overexcitability. Crucial to this study, then, is an understanding of the definition of overexcitability in general and emotional overexcitability in particular, and an investigation of how these overexcitabilities fit into the Theory of Positive Disintegration.

The study also examines coping strategies in the target population. This focus on coping raises a number of key questions for the study. Do the emotionally overexcited late adolescents cope in ways that are different from the norm? What, then, is the norm? Do coping strategies differ for males and females? This review of literature tries to answer all these questions.

#### *Adolescence*

In the twentieth century, particularly in the Industrial Age, adolescence was formally described as the teen years. Within the last three decades, adolescence has still been understood to begin with puberty, but its ending has become much less defined.

Two primary goals of adolescent development, identity formation and independence have now been extended beyond the teen years for many middle and upper class youth as parent-dependent college-aged students are still constructing their identities. The number of young Americans who partake of higher education has risen from 14 percent in 1940 to over 60 percent in the mid 1990s (Arnett, 2000).

A study by Harter (1990) confirms the influence of higher education on perceptions about adolescence. "Liberal educational policies that provide a wide spectrum of choices, and Western society's loss of ideological consensus, regarding fundamental religious, moral and political truths, have conspired to produce the need for a protracted adolescent moratorium" (p.337). Yet these extended adolescent years beyond high school differ from the earlier adolescent years in many ways, creating a need for new understandings and even new terminology to capture this unique stage.

The beginning of adolescence is clearly marked as the time when puberty takes place (Santrock, 1999). This biological development is obvious to both boys and girls and is often anticipated with both fear and excitement. Aside from physical changes, the cortical synapses of the brain reorganize in a way that affects prefrontal, cortical functioning. While the exact mechanics are unclear, both adolescent executive functioning and improved inhibition depend on this cerebral development (King, 2002).

The hormonal changes that take place in puberty raise the adolescent's awareness of his or her sexual identity whether one participates in a heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual lifestyle. These choices become consolidated by late adolescence so that sexual orientation is often decided upon in the late adolescent (Katchadourian, 1990).

Though biological changes initiate the adolescent phase, the related psychosocial issues that arise for adolescents are most significant. King (2002) sees the same set of growth tasks that Santrock (2003) discusses throughout adolescence, with subsequent levels achieved as new developmental stages occur. These growth tasks will form the outline in this review to examine how the adolescents function. The growth tasks listed by King are:

- 1) conceptualization
- 2) independence and identity issues
- 3) sexual drives
- 4) relationships
- 5) value systems
- 6) body image
- 7) career plans (p 335)

### *Conceptualization*

As noted above, changes in the prefrontal cortical functioning allow for changes in cognitive functioning. For Piaget (1958), individuals reach the highest stage of cognitive development at age 15-16 when they begin to use formal operations. In formal operations, the adolescent starts to think abstractly and can use hypotheses with a number of variables. The adolescent starts to distinguish between thinking of the self versus thinking of others. This has important ramifications for intimacy and identity issues. This thinking also allows the adolescent to consider alternatives for personal, occupational, sexual, and ideological decisions. Possibilities become more important than realities

(Muuss, 1969). Overton and Byrnes (1991) believed that many adults never reached this level of cognitive development.

Kurt Fischer proposed a *skill theory* in 1980 that went beyond the developmental phases proposed in Piaget's cognitive development theory. Although little or no research has examined growth beyond formal operations (supposedly attained by age 16) there is obvious growth that takes place in cognition. Fischer labels this growth in part of his growth theory as levels eight, nine and ten. Level eight, which he predicts developing in late high school years, involves *abstract mapping*, which is basically defined as a structuring that allows the organism to relate one set of people (i.e. doctor-patient) to a second set (i.e. mother-child). Level nine, which he predicts will develop in late adolescence, involves *abstract systems*. A system is a group of two subsets (like those used in the mapping definition), which are related to two different subsets. Level ten, which presumably also occurs in late adolescence, is when one system relates to another system, like mutually responsive relationships and dominator relationships. This he labels as a *system of abstract systems*.

Because this theory relies heavily on joint experiences between individual and the environment, it can be applied to many more domains than the cognitive developmental tasks of Piaget or IQ type tasks. Skill theory could also apply to language development, social development, and learning (Fischer, 1980).

### *Independence and Identity Issues*

Many people believe that gaining independence from parents and creating an individual identity are the most important tasks of late adolescent development (Arnett, 2000). Despite the independence gained from parents, the family still plays a major role

in identity formation. Family influence should bring about *individuality*, which consists of self-assertion and separateness, and *connectedness*, which is a sensitivity, respect, and an openness to others' views (Cooper & Ayers-Lopez, 1985).

Identity issues are involved in almost every aspect of late adolescent behavior. Indeed, Marcia (1980) described identity as an overarching "self-structure – an internal, self-constructed, dynamic organization of drives, abilities, beliefs, and individual history" (p.159). Everything that the individual has experienced comes together to form the identity.

Although personal independence and identity structuring are two specific goals of adolescent development, Erikson (1968) envisioned three stages of crisis in adolescence development as *industry* (developing a work ethic), *identity* (forging a unique self) and *intimacy* (fusing of two people's identities). The stages emerge in this developmental order because identity depends on acquiring specific skills and confidence in one's ability to work, and intimacy can only be achieved once this identity is secure enough to risk vulnerability in merging with another.

Several studies have sought to determine whether identity formation comes before intimacy (Lacombe & Gay, 1998, Schiedel & Marcia, 1985). These studies indicated that intimacy precedes identity for males, and that the two are intertwined for females with intimacy being more well developed than for males. But males who were more advanced in identity formation also scored higher in masculinity than those who were low in identity. Androgynous individuals had a slightly better chance of being more advanced in identity and intimacy development than those who were not androgynous. Some psychologists believe that Erikson's stage progression is different for males and females.

They propose that for males, identity formation comes before intimacy, but for females, intimacy precedes identity (Adelson, 1980). In fact Gilligan (1977) suggested that identity and intimacy were psychologically integrated for females.

The identity formation process does not begin or end in adolescence. But during late adolescence, advances in physical, cognitive, and socio-emotional skills combine to help sort through childhood identities and decide what to bring into adulthood. Erikson's *psychological moratorium* marks the period between adolescence and adulthood when adolescents experiment with identities they have drawn from their cultures. For instance, the Western culture has traditionally defined a male as strong and independent and the female as weak and dependent.

Marcia's 1966 study of identity produced a model similar to Erikson's stages of identity formation. Marcia proposes four identity statuses that describe the individual's progress in seeking identity. Through the process of deciding on an occupation and ideology the individual can reach:

- 1) *Identity achievement*. The individual has been through the decision making period and has self-selected an occupation and ideology.
- 2) *Foreclosure*. The individual has selected an occupation and ideology based on someone else's values rather than his own.
- 3) *Identity diffusion*. The individual cannot figure out occupation or ideological goals.
- 4) *Moratorium*. The individual is in the process of trying to figure out his or her vocation and ideological goals. The individual is in an identity crisis.

According to King, (2002) Marcia's taxonomy is not fully begun until the college years or beyond. Marcia (1994) admits that the first identity in identity achievement is not the final product. Identity continues to develop to accommodate individual and cultural changes. Individuals often go through a moratorium-achiever-moratorium-achiever (MAMA) cycle and emerge with a changed identity. Finally, Waterman (1992) stated that from the years before high school through the final years in college there is an increase in the number of adolescents who become identity achieved and a decrease in those who are identity diffused.

Interested in the role gender played within Marcia's research, Kroger (1997) examined Marcia's paradigm studies in which both sexes participated. She sought to find out whether and how gender differences influenced the identity development of adolescents and adults. Ultimately she found the developmental pathways taken by both sexes in identity development were the same (industry, identity, and intimacy). However, because of their later pubertal development, high school males tended to progress through these stages later.

Psychological theorists distinguish between the processes of ego development and identity formation. The ego brings together the superego (omnipotent parent) and the id (basic drives) to form a strong sense of self. It is the movement from superego to ego self-gratification that is the most critical stage in ego development (Josselson, 1980). A major task of ego development is to consolidate autonomy through individuation.

*Individuation* is described as a sense of one's distinctness from others. Because the individual must take greater responsibility for the self, autonomy grows as individuation



is achieved. It is during late adolescence when the individuation is dominant (Josselson, 1980).

Josselson (1980) recognized that ego is the guardian of self-esteem, and that self-esteem is very fragile for adolescents. Past achievements and present skills must come together in reality to test if one's self-concept is valid. Adolescents will often choose an external source of self-esteem that is much like their superego (coaches, ministers or older siblings). In essence, self-esteem is based on how successful one is in the domains that are considered to be important. For girls, popularity and appearance often remain important through late adolescence. For boys, factors like success, toughness, and developing early skill and knowledge of sexual matters are frequently of prime importance (Harter, 1990). By the college years, peers are much more important than parents in their influence on self-esteem. Self-esteem, like identity formation, improves throughout adolescence. It is thought that with increases in personal autonomy and freedom of choice the individual feels more in control of his self-esteem (Arnett, 2000).

Although skills and concepts are consolidated during late adolescence, a differentiation of the self into multiple domains also occurs during this time. This happens to support the multiple roles that the adolescent is called to occupy (self with father, mother, close friend, and romantic partner). These differences must be formed into a self-theory that has *internal consistency*, or the theory will be threatened to collapse by the contradictions (Epstein, 1973). The appearance of Fischer's (1980) *abstract systems* can help reduce the contradictions because the late adolescent has the cognitive ability to create a large, unified system with abstract single identities.

Conflict over opposing identities seems to be less problematic for boys than for girls. This is presumably because boys' roles are more independent from one another than girls'. Therefore boys have less need to look at their relationships as integrated (Gilligan, 1977).

There is also a great concern in late adolescence with the appearance of *false selves*. As the late adolescent seeks to integrate different selves, they must critique each self to see if it is reality-based. A study by Harter, Bresnick, Bouchee, and Whitesell (1997) investigated the multiple roles of late adolescence and the existence of false selves. The results support the findings that late adolescents develop multiple roles and have the cognitive ability to juggle them. However, the study cited problems across adolescence with false selves, and they seemed to cause depression in all stages of adolescence.

### *Sexual Desire*

In late adolescence the hormonal drives to explore physical relationships have subsided some. Late adolescents are concerned with exploring aspects of intimacy and caring. The growth in abstract thinking has allowed the late adolescents to see social situations from the perspective of others and this contributes to their ability to show genuine empathy and concern for their romantic partner.

Sex roles are clearly defined in the majority of American culture. Males are to be tough and sexually precocious, while females are expected to be warm and caring. But late adolescence is the time when males in particular want more for themselves than these cultural stereotypes. Schiedel and Marcia (1985) noted that "sex roles are useful to the

adolescent as a kind of ready made identity that he or she can use and be supported in while experimenting with other aspects of identity (p.159).”

### *Relationships*

Although romantic partners certainly become more important in late adolescence, there is still an enormous emphasis on friendships during this period. Even as late adolescents remain concerned with finding their own style and identity, there is great tolerance for differences between friends (King, 2002).

Because the late adolescents are in the throes of an identity crisis and have to cope with new experiences, identity development, and issues of self-esteem, they become more dependent on support from others. Since they are trying to break from their parents, they increasingly turn to their peers for support. At this point in time, the late adolescents are spending only eight percent of their time talking to family and a third of their time talking to peers (King, 2002).

This transition period also involves experimentation. Late adolescents must figure out which social behaviors, aspects of their personality, and roles are best accepted in their social world as they try to define their identities. Friends and peer groups help in the experimentation and exploration of all these issues (Coleman, 1980).

A variety of studies have looked at friendship as a support during the late adolescent identity crisis. Mendelson and Aboud (1999) concluded that females found more support than males in the friendship functions of stimulating companionship, help, intimacy, reliable alliance, self-validation and emotional stability. Johnson and Aries (1983) found that in conversations with same-sex friends, females talked more about themselves and close relationships, whereas males talked more about activities. A 2005

study by Azmitra, Ittel and Radmacher found that loyalty, trust and emotional support were the primary friendship obligations. In looking at high self-esteem versus low self-esteem adolescents, 75 percent of the high self-esteem participants mentioned these positive aspects of friendship compared to 47 percent of low self-esteem individuals. For females, 53 percent saw emotional support as an important obligation versus 30 percent of the males. Both males and females appreciated that their friends were different from themselves, which may make them more accepting of their own individuality. Both genders placed equal importance on relationships.

### *Value Systems*

The psychoanalytic view of moral development states that the superego loosens some of its idealism and begins to operate on more reasonable goals and more mature moral judgments over time (Jacobsen, 1964). Erikson (1970) felt that morality helps form the identity and is its guardian. When adolescents lose faith in their childhood values, they lose a sense of purpose. They must then search for a new sense of purpose that fits with the evidence they see and make sense with their more advanced cognitive level.

Like Piaget, Kohlberg (1976) felt that cognitive disequilibrium prompted some of the moral developmental growth. Cognitive disequilibrium occurs when one is exposed to a level of development structurally higher than one's own. The need to decrease the tension this conflict brings about and the need to make sense of the contradiction yields growth. Role taking occurs as a result of cognitive disequilibrium when individuals are able to see different perspectives and this helps to resolve the cognitive conflict.

Morality is separate from yet similar to religious and political ideologies. It would seem that identity is partly formed before religious and political ideologies are solidified. Although most individuals raised in a certain religion will stay in it for life, if change is to

occur, it happens in late adolescence. In one study (Gallup & Bezilla, 1992) it was found that ninety five percent of adolescents said they believed in God or a universal spirit while the remaining five percent are still struggling with an operational ideology. These researchers also found that most college students who were wrestling with religious and political ideologies were in Marcia's stages of foreclosure or diffusion.

### *Body Image*

Most of the physiological changes that occur during adolescence are completed before late adolescence. Yet personal appearance remains an important attribute in friendships through college and later (Santrock, 1999). Linked with body image are risks of such illnesses as bulimia and anorexia. Because these risk factors are discussed here, other risk behaviors like drug use and mental health will be examined here as well.

Eating disorders are considered risk illnesses and they are also closely linked with body image. Primarily an illness of the well-educated white middle class, both boys and girls are affected in late adolescence. Yet females are at a higher risk for these behaviors than males. In adolescence it is felt that when individuals perceive they lack control in other areas of their lives they will turn to anorexia or bulimia as they can control their eating (Polce-Lynch, Myers, Kliewer & Kilmartin, 2001).

Anorexia is also known to affect early maturing girls later in their lives. Because early maturers tend to be heavier than late maturing girls, they tend to have lower self-esteem. Self-esteem is also threatened by the fact that early maturers are emotionally immature in relation to their body development and are often forced into dating situations before they are ready for them. This can also cause teen pregnancy, which negatively

affects self-esteem. Males are under pressure to have “buff” bodies, and so will turn to anorexia to lose weight.

The gap between biological sexual maturity and the social maturity necessary to express sexuality can also present problems for adolescents. The problem is still evident for late adolescents as they are still developing a sense of intimacy. Yet sexual activity in adolescence is no longer seen as deviant. Now it seems to be the norm. Since the 1960’s adolescents have become increasingly sexually active at younger ages. According to the National Research Council in 1987, 67 percent of 18-year-old boys and 44 percent of 18-year-old girls were sexually active. By age 20 these figures had gone up to 80 percent for males and 70 percent for females. In the year 2003, 47 percent of high school children (this includes both genders and all ages) had had sexual intercourse. Of the 19 million new cases of sexually transmitted diseases a year, 15-24 year olds accounted for half. (National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, 2003).

Although the literature on adolescent development does not always look at environmental factors (like home and street life) as leading to drug abuse, the presence of drug use (particularly marijuana) in twelfth graders had increased from 22 percent in 1992 to 36 percent in 1995. Alcohol use in college students shows an increase over time in heavy drinking (Johnston, O’Malley, & Bachman, 1995). Most students consider this drinking as a group activity and consider that it poses little risk. Death by DWI is a significant risk, however, and is the leading cause of death among late adolescents (Millstein & Litt, 1990)

In a 2001 study of risk taking among 954 Australian male and female students (age 15-19), gender was found to have no affect on the tendency towards risk taking

behavior that places one in physical danger. There were high levels of participation in risk behaviors among the sample as a whole despite the fact that close to 50 percent of the sample included church-going youth. Extreme risk taking participation (like skydiving) was very low. This seemed to indicate that youth are not heedless or reckless, but that they take risks as they see justified within their own risk hierarchies (Abbot-Chapman & Denholm, 2001).

Although all risk behaviors may be fatal, suicide provides the most direct path to death. Suicide is the third leading cause of death in this country for 15-24 year olds (Shneidman, 1996). Males are three times more likely to commit suicide, although females attempt it more frequently. Reasons for adolescent suicide are loss of a girl or boy friend, poor grades, unwanted pregnancy, and lack of emotional support (Santrock, 1999).

There are cases of mental illness in late adolescents, but psychiatrists feel that these are largely inherited problems that just tend to remain hidden in childhood and surface in adolescence. Depression, like suicide, often occurs when the adolescents are not successful or interested in areas they or their parents feel are important. Adolescents often feel support is contingent on meeting expectations. Depression is more prevalent in females (Santrock, 2003).

In spite of the negative pall that risk behaviors may cast on adolescence, the majority of adolescents go into adulthood without significant problems. Risk behaviors can be partially explained as part of identity exploration. Risks also do not seem risky to those trying them because adolescents do not think they can be hurt. There is also an element of sensation seeking in risk behaviors (Arnett, 2000).

## *Career Plans*

The last growth task of late adolescence is career planning. There are three main theorists who wrote about adolescents' decision making in career development. Ginzberg (1972), in his developmental career choice theory, argued that children go through three developmental stages. *Fantasy* takes the child up to about age 11. In the *tentative* stage (ages 11-17) children evaluate their capacities and values in preparation for the *realistic* stage (18- mid twenties). Those who believe that it relates most to middle-SES adolescents have challenged this theory.

Super (1976) developed a *career self-concept theory* that starts in adolescence. He identified five specific phases of development. Between the ages of 14-18, *crystallization* occurs when adolescents try to match ideas of work with their global self-concept. Between 18-22, the career choices are narrowed down in *specification*. At ages 21-24, young adults complete their training and enter work in the *implementation* phase. Decisions about specific careers are made in the *stabilization* phase between ages 25-35. Finally, after age 35, individuals try to advance in their specific careers during the *consolidation* phase.

Holland (1987) felt that individuals could match their career choices with their personalities. This resulted in the *Personality type theory* that predicts individuals will enjoy their careers more if properly matched. Holland proposed six basic personality types. *Realistic* people have few social skills but are good at practical problem solving skills and would be happiest in work requiring mechanical skills. The *investigative* people, who are oriented to concepts and theories and away from interpersonal relationships, would enjoy careers in math and science. *Social* personalities have good



verbal and interpersonal skills and should enter the “people” professions. *Conventional* personalities like structured activities and would enjoy careers as bank tellers, secretaries or file clerks. *Enterprising* individuals like leading others with their verbal skills. They are best matched with careers in sales, politics or management. Finally, those with artistic personalities should be happy in creative careers such as art and writing.

While the three theories discussed are criticized for being simplistic, they represent an attempt to reconcile identity and growth with career planning. While most college freshmen do not know what they want to do in adult life, many more are decided by senior year. Still others will continue experimenting with careers up to and beyond their thirties. Many career options are now widely available to college graduates of both sexes, and late adolescents tend to try on different options until one fits. Taking a job is the final step to autonomy and the start of adulthood (Santrock, 1999).

#### *Gifted, late adolescent males*

In conducting a study on gifted, late adolescent males, it is important to examine previous research conducted on this particular population. While not specifically answering the question of how this population experiences and copes with emotional overexcitability, by highlighting the problems and strengths of the target population this research may shed light on this core question.

Harper (1994) conducted a phenomenological study to understand what it was like to be a high achieving African American male college student at a large, predominantly white university. He was particularly interested in how each participant and his peers perceived notions of his masculinity. Issues of masculinity are important in the study of emotionality in late adolescent males because emotionality is often seen as a

feminine trait. The author found that while the high achieving African American men had definitions of masculinity that coincided with traditional White values, the African American men were trying to succeed and compete for the betterment of their racial communities. Further, they were respected by same-race peers even though their definitions of masculinity were based on being “tough guys” or “players of women” (p.102).

Grantham (2003) designed a qualitative embedded single case study to examine the motivation driving his Black male participant. The overriding question of the study was, “Why do some Black students choose to participate in gifted and advanced level programs.” The embedded case study allowed Grantham to use the conceptual framework of the Participant Motivation Expectancy- Value Model (PME-VM) as it related to the participant’s perception. The PME-VM specifically looked at motivation. In this case, the more positive the participant’s perception of the three constructs in the model, the more motivation he would display to participate in the gifted classes. The constructs were participant competence expectancy, participant outcome attainment expectancy, and value of participation outcomes. These three constructs were examined in the context of social influences, teacher influences, academic courses and curricular influences, and school environmental influences. All of these influences are important factors in the ability to cope within a school environment.

Maree and Ebersohn (2002) conducted a study on two South African white males (aged thirteen and seventeen) using both quantitative and qualitative methods. The purpose of the case study was to see if there was a correlation between high achieving boys and emotional intelligence. One boy had an average IQ; the other had not been

tested but was high achieving. Both were presumed to have high emotional intelligence based on criteria set forth in the literature. When they were given the Senior South African Individual Scale and the High School Personality Questionnaire (HSPQ) they were allowed to discuss their emotions while taking the tests. These comments were evaluated relative to the scores obtained on the sections where stress and no stress had been mentioned. Conclusions were drawn by jointly considering the results from the quantitative tests and the qualitative data.

The results of the HSPQ on both boys indicated that they were emotionally stable. This is an important distinction in the definition of emotional intelligence. Other traits of emotional intelligence--including dominance, motivated optimism, self-control and adaptability -- were confirmed to be present in both boys, based on answers in the HSPQ. The conclusion drawn was that IQ is not necessarily predictive of achievement. The HSPQ was presented as an additional assessment tool that could better predict achievement based on presumed emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence is not the same thing as emotional overexcitability, yet there are commonalities between the two. Other studies have noted that overexcitabilities could be used in place of the IQ test to determine giftedness.

The study had a limitation. The authors compared HSPQ traits with what they reported were traits of emotional intelligence. There was not an exact match between the HSPQ and emotional intelligence on any of the traits.

Wilcove (1998) used exploratory, qualitative methodology to examine adolescent sex-role identity. Too often self-report measures like the Bem Sex-Role Inventory result in a social desirability bias, eliciting responses that conform to society's definitions of

masculinity, femininity, and androgyny rather than representing the participants' true feelings. To overcome this, Wilcove conducted in-depth interviews with 14 male, gifted students (mean age 17) to elicit the participants' views. He asked whether the boys described themselves as masculine, feminine, androgynous, or some combination of the three. He examined what importance they placed on "feminine" values (i.e., affectivity and relationality). He also investigated the emotional difficulties experienced by these boys as they negotiated their sex-role identities, and whether intellectual giftedness had a place in gender schemata. These questions have a direct bearing on the experience of emotional overexcitability. Males high in emotional overexcitability are often found in a position where they have to defend their masculinity or else mask their emotionality.

The main conclusions drawn from the study were that gifted males tend to be more androgynous than non-identified males and that they see asynchronous development between their intellectual and emotional capacities. The author also concluded that there was a "hidden resistance" (p.302) among the participants to discussing issues of their possible femininity. Because of this resistance, and the fact that many participants became hyperintellectual when answering questions about emotions, conducting more interviews than the one they participated in might have generated better data, as the participants could have become more comfortable with the researcher over time and begun to let down their defenses and become less intellectual. Also, allowing time to elapse between interviews could have allowed the boys to reflect on their feelings more, as they were obviously conflicted about where they stood on the issues.

Cross (1996) performed psychological autopsies on three males who had committed suicide at different times over the years while at the same school. Each was

either in grade 11 or 12 of a residential high school for the academically talented. The autopsies assessed data including behaviors, thoughts, feelings, and relationships of the deceased students. These data were gathered from interviews with people who had significant relationships with the students, and from archival information (school records, diaries, suicide notes, letters, essays and medical records.)

Seven common themes emerged among the three students: a) All suffered from depression; b) Suicide contagion seemed evident; c) Suicide was considered an option as a result of the behavior of cultural icons; d) The students had many characteristics of overexcitabilities and exhibited behavior that reflected Dabrowski's Level II or III of positive disintegration (to be discussed later in this review); e) Suicide was openly discussed as a viable option; f) Unguided introspection through journal writings allowed them to avoid social interaction; and g) their obsessive thinking was never disconfirmed. By arguing that the victims in this study were high in overexcitabilities, Cross's study supports the belief that suicide is a fairly common thought in the minds of emotionally overexcited late adolescents.

Hébert (1998a), in his study of factors that influenced achievement and underachievement in gifted Black males, examined the lives of two high-ability high school males, one achiever and one non-achiever. Hébert was able to assemble a clear picture of each participant by asking how these young men found support in their lives. His findings, while not directly applicable to the question of experiencing emotional overexcitability, do have a bearing on coping with the experience. Support systems and mentors play an important role in coping. The data revealed that parental and community support are important factors in high achievement. Additionally, it was implied that

counselors trained to be sensitive to the needs of African American males should be available to direct the educational goals of students, and provide the additional support they might need.

Hébert and Olenchak (2000) used a comparative case study in their study of the interrelationships between mentors and gifted, underachieving males. They sought to find out how the mentor-protégé relationships developed, and how these relationships were successful in helping to reverse underachievement. Once again, the presence of a supportive person plays a significant role in coping with emotional overexcitability. The data revealed that a single, adult mentor who was non-judgmental provided the best source of consistent social/emotional support. This mentor also designed an interest-based strategy for reversing underachievement. Both the non-judgmental stance and the interest-based strategy made the mentor successful with the participants.

Hébert (2000a) studied six high-achieving high school males to determine the factors that enabled them to achieve in their urban environment. As a result of the data analysis, belief in self was found to be the most salient factor in the participants' achievement. This belief in self came from family support, support from other important adults in their lives, and experiences that enabled them to see themselves as competent young men in an urban environment.. Sensitivity also seemed to be an important trait among the participants. It seems implicit that along with belief in self, these participants must have been comfortable with their gender identity because of their comfort with being sensitive and emotional. It was important that the author stressed that studies be done in less culturally diverse populations, and in different age groups. These studies

could shed further light on the issue of gender identity in Caucasian environments and in middle school aged children.

Hébert (1998b) isolated one participant from a larger study in order to examine the underachievement of an artistically talented young man in high school. After analyzing the data, Hébert found that poor curricular choices, inadequate counseling and guidance, and the lack of parental empowerment were recurring problems contributing to the participant's pattern of underachievement. These results could show that potentially valuable coping strategies were not available.

Hébert (2000b) conducted an examination of six gifted young men from a university setting. They had all chosen a career in elementary education. Hébert wanted to discover what factors enabled the gifted, male undergraduate students to pursue a career in elementary education and what support systems assisted them in pursuing these careers. Once again, support systems relate to an ability to cope. Hébert identified broad themes that accounted for the career decision of these young men: belief in self; difficult experiences during childhood, adolescence and early adulthood; empathy and comfort with psychological androgyny; exposure to significant career models in male teachers; parental acceptance of their career aspirations, and comfort with their choices.

Hébert (1996) conducted an ethnographic study of three gifted Latino young men in an urban high school. He examined how three young men overcame the obstacles of growing up in an environment surrounded by poverty, gangs and drug abuse. By analyzing the data amassed from participant observation and interviews, Hébert was able to cluster statements into separate issues that had common themes. The issues Hébert identified included sources of resilience, family factors and resilience, extra familial

support, extra-curricular activities, and resilience and aspirations. Resilience, he found, was a matter of developing effective coping skills.

In Hébert's (2001) study of six gifted underachieving high school men, he employed a qualitative approach through case study and ethnographic research. Through participant observation, in-depth ethnographic interviews and document review, he identified patterns indicating that the major factors influencing the participants' underachievement were inappropriate curricular and counseling experiences, and a variety of family issues. In addition, Hébert noted that organizational skills, self-regulation, and coping were problem areas in the personalities of the participants.

Olenchak and Hébert (2002) conducted comparative qualitative case studies, each focusing on a gifted, underachieving, first-generation university student from a non-dominant culture. Each participant attended either a rural or urban university. The researchers were interested in finding out what the participants expected from the university experience and how their backgrounds and support systems guided them. Once again, the question of relationships and support systems in their backgrounds positively influenced their coping ability.

Olenchak and Hébert were able to suggest solutions to areas of need that apply generally to all first-generation students of color. Specific counseling approaches and mentor relationships were key among the solutions suggested.

Hébert (2006) conducted an examination of high achieving gifted male college students in a Greek fraternity to determine how the experiences in their fraternity influenced their academic success. The results indicated that all five participants had been student-athletes and had coasted academically in high school. Their membership in the



fraternity encouraged academic achievement, helped them develop strong relationships, provided opportunities to practice leadership skills, encouraged them to work in community service, and allowed them to flourish socially. The presence of their chapter advisor offered a strong and healthy mentor relationship. In this case, the fraternity itself seemed to provide positive coping methods for gifted late adolescents.

Piechowski (2006) wrote a book that described how male and female adolescents experienced emotional overexcitability by using their own words. He divided his book into sections that examined specific issues. While providing an enlightening view into the minds of these gifted young men and women, he did not look at the issue of how they coped with their emotional overexcitability.

These studies provided information about teen-age and college aged gifted males who failed or flourished in their environments. Support systems, mentor relationships and developing other positive coping skills were seen as key to flourishing.

### *Theory of Positive Disintegration*

The Polish psychiatrist, Kazmirez Dabrowski, after years of working with gifted and creative patients, formulated a theory of positive disintegration to support the characteristics and the resulting potential for moral growth that he observed in this special population.

His interest in morality stemmed from the fact that he lived through two world wars and saw the awful treatment that resulted from those wars. Although not a Jew, he was held as a prisoner several times, and had a near death experience in the concentration camps. He felt there had to be an explanation about why some people achieved moral superiority and some were morally depraved (Tillier, 2008).

In his seminal work, *Positive Disintegration* (1964), he postulated that all individuals have the capacity for moral development equal to the level of *developmental potential they* possess. Developmental potential, much like intellect, is largely an inherited factor.

### *Developmental Potential*

Dabrowski (1972) describes Developmental Potential as:

the constitutional endowment, which determines the character and the extent of mental growth possible for a given individual. The developmental potential can be assessed on the basis of the following components: psychic overexcitability, special abilities and talents, and autonomous factors (p.293).

Special abilities and talents could lie in the realm of intellectual, artistic, or athletic acumen, for example. Factors of development, including the autonomous factor, are described below.

### *Factors of Development*

The *first factor*, or one's constitutional endowment, lies in the biological instincts one inherits, along with primitive and reflexive reactions. A person operating in the *first factor* is primarily focused on survival of the self.

The *second factor*, or the social environment, is controlled by the social mores of the culture in which one lives. Those operating in the *second factor* have subverted their lower instincts to respond to external societal values. The self in the *second factor* is governed by the laws of society and by fear of punishment. This is very similar to Kohlberg's stages One and Two of moral development, in which the individual acts in a way that avoids punishment and produces rewards (Davis & Rimm, 1979). The *first and*

*second factors* differ from one another in that individuals operating in the first factor are controlled by biological laws, whereas, those operating in the second factor are controlled by their social environment.

The *third factor*, also known as the autonomous factor, rejects the primitive biological instincts as it transforms them into internal values. Social mores and expectations are reviewed critically and accepted or rejected based on the individual's self-developed values. Miller and Silverman (1987) described this *third factor* as “the conscious self-director of the individual toward his or her own development. It represents responsibility exercised for one's own emotional and moral development” (p.223). This factor, although influenced by the other two, “achieves an independence from these factors and through conscious differentiation and self-definition takes its own position in determining the course of the development of personality” (Dabrowski, 1964, p.54).

Along with special talents and the autonomous factor, overexcitability constitutes the final element of developmental potential. Overexcitabilities (OEs) are key to understanding the special characteristics found in the gifted population that help to empower them to achieve extraordinary moral growth. It is the OE's, specifically emotional overexcitability that serve as the foundation of this study.

### *Overexcitabilities*

Dabrowski found that there were *Overexcitabilities* (OEs) present in gifted individuals that, depending on their strength, could provide the impetus for one's Developmental Potential. Dabrowski (1972) described these OEs as “higher than average responsiveness to stimuli” (p.303). As Piechowski (1979) stated, “Only when the expressions of ‘excitability’ are above and beyond what can be considered common or

average do they make a significant contribution to development” (p.28) Piechowski was a protégé of Dabrowski’s and has been responsible for carrying on his work after Dabrowski’s death.

The five OEs identified by Dabrowski are psychomotor, sensual, imaginational, intellectual and emotional. These OEs may occur in isolation, or they may also appear in combination with one another. Each OE does contain elements of emotionality, however, which are largely manifested in nervous actions. As Dabrowski stated, an OE is an increased stimuli responsiveness, which may be measured “in intensity, frequency and duration . . . (and) have the effect of making concrete stimuli more complex, enhancing emotional content, and amplifying every experience” (Scheiver, 1985, p.224).

Psychomotor OE is characterized by a surplus of energy. This OE gives the gifted individual the physical drive to accomplish large amounts of work. The expression of emotional tension in psychomotor OE is frequently seen in compulsive talking, acting impulsively, workaholism, and acting out (Piechowski, 1979).

Sensual OE is expressed through enhanced sensory and aesthetic pleasure. One is extremely sensitive to both the delightful and annoying aspects of sensory experiences. Expressions of emotional tension in Sensual OE are frequently seen in overindulgences in sensory pleasures or wanting to be in the limelight (Piechowski, 1979).

Intellectual OE manifests itself through intense mental activity. Indicators of intellectual OE include curiosity, concentration, keen observation, and detailed planning. Individuals high in Intellectual OE display a propensity for asking probing questions and problem solving. There is also a capacity for reflexive thought, thinking about thinking, introspection and critical independent thinking (Piechowski, 1979).

Imaginational OE is shown through the free play of imagination with a special capacity for fantasy and invention. Daydreaming is common. The mixing of truth and fiction, focusing on illusions and elaborate dreaming are expressions of emotional tensions (Piechowski, 1979).

In emotional OE, all feelings and emotions are intensified in both positive and negative ways. The person experiences strong affective expressions, including ecstasy, depression, enthusiasm, guilt, fears and anxieties, and suicidal moods. The person will often manifest strong attachments, especially for people, places and animals. Relational sensitivity and a tendency towards loneliness also distinguish the person with high emotional OE (Piechowski, 1979).

An individual can have any one or a combination of any or all of these OEs. However, Dabrowski theorized that intellectual, imaginational and emotional OE were the most crucial for moral development. Moral development is seen as a highly creative achievement when one attains Level IV (to be discussed below) in Dabrowski's theory or self-actualization in Maslow's theory.

Intellectual OE provides the means for accomplishing the goal of moral development by being able to rationally organize and execute a plan of action. Emotional OE provides the compass for moral development because it encourages empathy for other's needs as well as a desire for personal agency in effecting a positive change. Imaginational OE provides a goal because it allows the individual to imagine how things might be better and then design solutions for achieving that end. Of these three, Dabrowski (1964) considered emotional OE to be the most crucial for the achievement of

higher moral development. He observed, “Our ultimate direction and control is at every level located in the emotional function rather than the intellectual” (p.9).

### *Emotional Overexcitability*

Emotional OE is the most significant of the five OEs in determining development potential (Ackerman & Lind, 1997; Dabrowski, 1964; Miller & Silverman, 1987; Piechowski, 1979). Emotional OE may be positively manifested in feelings of compassion, attachment, a sense of responsibility, and the capacity for self-examination. (Ackerman & Lind, 1997). It may also manifest itself negatively in feelings of guilt, shame, fear and anxiety, depressive and suicidal moods, and loneliness (Piechowski, 2003). These internal conflicts, although sometimes considered hallmarks of the adolescent years, are heightened to a significant degree in the gifted individual. In fact, many psychiatrists and psychologists would see an individual who is repeatedly in the throes of heightened emotional OE as demonstrating signs of significant psychosis.

Many personality theorists share the view that internal conflict is a necessary requisite for personality development. Erikson (1968) described this conflict, for example, in terms of Identity versus Identity Diffusion, a process in which the ego experiences synthesis and resynthesis. Jung similarly discussed the tension and psychotic disturbance in the personality functions (Lysy & Piechowski, 1983) necessary for self-actualization to take place. Maslow, in contrast, believed personal growth occurred in healthy, non-neurotic people who are striving for a higher personality ideal.

A significant distinction between Maslow and Dabrowski is that Maslow saw the process of personal growth as ecstasy, whereas Dabrowski, along with Erikson, and Jung, viewed it as agony (Zelhart, 1985). Indeed, Dabrowski talked of the disintegrative

process as part of personal growth, yet one that demonstrates psychoneurosis. He believed, however, that these psychoneuroses (most stemming from emotional overexcitability) were necessary for reintegration at a higher level. (Dabrowski, 1964) If one reviews the characteristics of emotional OE, it becomes clear that agony (as experienced through psychoneuroses) is a fitting word to use in describing the experience.

When one combines special talents and abilities, the autonomous factor, and psychic overexcitabilities, the developmental potential exists to cause the individual to achieve higher than average stages of moral development and creative expression. Dabrowski labels these stages (similar to Erikson's and Maslow's stages) as *levels of development*.

#### *Levels of Development*

Dabrowski proposed five possible levels of development. These levels are biological or mental forces, which control behavior and its development. They are accompanied by *dynamisms*, defined by Dabrowski (1972) as “instincts, drives and intellectual processes, combined with emotions” (p.294). Dynamisms are the prime motivational force in Positive Disintegration. They are the emotional-cognitive operations that provide the structure and mechanisms of change in each level. (Piechowski, 2003)

Movement from one level to the next is fueled by one's Developmental Potential (DP). In Level I, or primary integration, the main concern is with self-protection and survival. It is man at his most primitive state in the *first factor*. Level II, or unilevel disintegration, is governed by the *second factor*, where the individual is subject to the

dictates of society. On this level, the individual fluctuates horizontally between opposing external opinions, lacking a personal inner direction. Consequently, he feels inferior to others and is therefore subject to the values and opinions of others.

The move from Level I to Level II is a developmental process that occurs without undue anguish and is accomplished in the general population. It is an automatic developmental shift, but when one moves from Level II to Level III and from Level III to Level IV the individual experiences *Disintegration*. These level shifts are not automatic, as they require a great deal of thought and emotional upheaval.

Level III, or spontaneous multilevel disintegration, occurs when the *third factor* comes into the fore. The individual develops a sense of what should be and compares this with what is. The tension that results causes a number of dynamisms to occur:

- 1) *dissatisfaction with oneself*, by seeing what is undesirable in oneself;
- 2) *inferiority toward oneself* through failing to realize one's perceived potential;
- 3) *disquietude with oneself* as there is a tension in one's inner being;
- 4) *shame* over the deficiencies one sees in oneself;
- 5) and *guilt* over one's perceived moral failures.

At Level IV, or organized multilevel disintegration, one has reached the equivalent of Maslow's Self-Actualization. At this level, one's ideals and actions are in harmony. There is a strong sense of responsibility for others, and there is a substantial inner growth. The third factor, or the self-determination of one's inner life and actions, directs the dynamisms that are at work in this level. These dynamisms are:

- 1) *subject-object in oneself* when a critical examination of one's motives and aims occurs;



- 2) *responsibility* for being empathic to social needs;
- 3) *inner psychic transformation* occurs when the inner life has been restructured to keep one from reverting to lower level functioning;
- 4) the *education of oneself* and *autopsychotherapy*;
- 5) *self-control*;
- 6) *self-awareness*;
- 7) and *autonomy*.

Although perceived as positive dynamisms, the individual still experiences a disequilibrium between what is and what could be. There is a yearning to be at one with all mankind.

Finally, at Level V, secondary integration occurs when one has reached one's personality ideal (Piechowski, 2003). At this level, there is a lack of inner conflict over the self. One feels at peace and centered. Now "what is" is equal to "what ought to be" for the individual. There is no longer any regression, and one works in service to humanity. It is governed by a communalistic attitude towards others. The dynamisms that occur at this level are:

- 1) *Responsibility* for taking on tasks for the sake of others and one's own development.
- 2) *Authentism-pervasive*, as there is a hierarchy of values in action.
- 3) *Autonomy*, with a confidence in one's development, and freedom from lower levels of oneself.
- 4) *Personality ideal*, used as the highest guiding principle.

There are few who attain Level V. Christ and Gandhi are examples given by Dabrowski.

#### *Positive Disintegration*

It is when moving to Level III that one first confronts the possibility for positive or negative disintegration. Dabrowski (1964) stated that the personality structure is often loosened during puberty, but the levels of internal conflict necessary to set the disintegration in motion (resulting from any of the autonomous factors) are not necessarily age-related (p.6). It has been found, however, that gifted children reach higher levels of moral development, and at an earlier age, than the general population (Gross, 1997). Disintegration occurs as the personality comes apart, and this is positive if it leads to a reintegration of the personality at a higher level of self-understanding and development. Disintegration may also have negative effects if the person stays at the same level or regresses through alcohol, drugs, or other elements that would lead one to avoid growth.

There are certain dynamisms that continue across all levels of disintegration.

- 1) *Empathy*, which is a characteristic of emotional OE, continues to focus the individual on connectedness and caring for others.
- 2) *Inner conflict* begins as a clash of primitive drives, only to become emotionally and consciously driven.
- 3) *Identification* is the striving towards higher levels and the Personality Ideal.
- 4) *Dis-identification* is the process of distancing oneself from lower levels and drives.
- 5) The *Disposing and Directing Center* is where sheer will to change drives the individual.
- 6) The *Creative Instinct* is the drive to perfect oneself (Piechowski, 2003).

*Overview of Positive Disintegration at work*

In essence, the developmental instinct is made up initially of *automatic* (egocentric) instincts (Level I) and moves naturally to *syntonic* (heterocentric) instincts, like sympathy, cognitive and religious drives, and social needs. These instincts appear at Levels I and II. There are conflicts between the two instincts, and with every battle a new development of personality takes place.

As the instincts of self-development and self-improvement emerge in Level III, the third factor starts to take over the internal environment. Feelings of shame, guilt, and “subject-object” appear in the development of the personality.

While under the influence of Positive Disintegration, will and intelligence become separated from each other and become independent of basic impulses. What one wants to do and what one thinks is reasonable to do may be in conflict. As the personality continues to develop and reintegration occurs, will and intelligence are unified again at the higher level. Introspection and self-evaluation are constants of multi-level development, and they are both cognitive and affective (Piechowski, 2003).

While in the process of personality development, anxiety, nervousness, and psychoneuroses are not pathological, but expressions of developmental continuity, positive disintegration, and creative nonadaptation. These crises are periods of increased self-insight, creativity, and personality development. In a normal person, disintegration is provoked through the instincts of self-improvement. In genius, it is through the instinct of creativity. True mental disturbance exists only in negative disintegration (Dabrowski, 1972).

There is a linear progression from Levels I – V, but these stages are not related to chronological age, rather to mental age. Although heredity and environment continue to

exert an influence on development, levels in general are not incorporated into the subsequent level. Rather, the entire personality breaks apart and reintegrates by taking what it needs from previous levels and integrating it into the new level. Regression is possible in the form of negative disintegration (Dabrowski, 1964).

It is obvious that emotional overexcitability plays a large role in making a person morally advanced, but there are also other less positive aspects to emotional overexcitability. If one is not aware of the possibility of positive disintegration, the overemotionality can be difficult to deal with. This is where the aspect of coping comes in. How do gifted, or non-identified, people cope with distress?

### *Coping*

In a definition reflecting a global understanding of coping, Lazarus and Folkman (1984) describe it as “a process of managing demands (external or internal) that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of a person” (p. 61). This definition raises multiple issues. First, coping is defined as a process rather than a stable trait or style. This means that an individual can use one or many different coping mechanisms in a single situation. Second, the definition refers to managing rather than mastering because many coping situations can’t be solved. Third, the same situation may tax one individual greatly while another may take the situation in stride. Part of this response may depend on the context of the situation. Finally, the coping resources of a given individual vary according to age, cognitive development and gender, and different coping styles develop at different rates for both males and females. All of these issues and others will be discussed in an effort to elucidate this understanding of coping.

There are three aspects of coping that have been cited by Lazarus (1991):

- 1) Coping context is discovered by happenstance rather than coming from stable personality characteristics.
- 2) Coping strategies are defined by effort. It does not have to be a completed act, but an attempt to deal with a problem.
- 3) Coping is a process that changes over time. An appraisal takes place before the coping begins and a reappraisal occurs once a coping strategy has been used. Coping is not an event that is fixed in time.

With regards to Lazarus's first point, Steinberg (1985) has proposed that there are four major contexts that one should consider when looking at adolescent behavior and coping: families, peer groups, schools, and workplaces. When a change occurs in any or all of these contexts it calls for the adolescent to develop a coping strategy to help make the transition.

The effort that one expends in coping is based on what resources individuals have access to, what strategies they use most often, the aspects of a particular problem, and the time frame (Cohen and Lazarus, 1983). Individuals are likely to cope differently with an imminent danger as opposed to a problem that may take an extended period of time to resolve.

Appraisal is an important aspect of the coping process. In a primary appraisal the individual might ask, "What is at stake?" Then in a secondary appraisal he might say, "What resources do I have available?" Finally, after a coping strategy has been tried, a tertiary appraisal will look at the outcome and determine what subsequent actions might be taken. These three stages emphasize the process of coping (Frydenberg, 1997).

Coping seems to fall into one of two types: problem-focused and emotion-focused coping. The particular strategy employed seems to depend on the traits of age, cognitive development, context and gender. Additionally, the levels of ego development, pubertal maturation, adaptive functioning and emotional well being (Hauser & Bowlbs, 1990) affect coping. Threats to emotional well being are key in triggering a coping response. Therefore it is critical to understand what is involved in this state. Emotional well being rests in dimensions of self-perception, self-efficacy, beliefs, self-control, self-esteem, intelligence, temperament, and locus of control (Compas, 1987).

Problem-focused coping involves the process of reframing the problem in which individuals address the environmental or internal difficulty that is posing a threat. This strategy seems to work best in a situation over which the individual has some control (Compas, 1987) and when the problem seems changeable. Problem-focused coping also seems to be used most in work-related stressors (Frydenberg, 1997).

Emotion-focused coping seems more multi-faceted as individual methods have been described as wishful thinking, detachment, seeking social support, focusing on the positive, self-blame, tension reduction, and keeping to oneself. Generally speaking when a problem is unchangeable or is a health-related stressor, emotion-focused coping is used (Frydenberg, 1997).

It is difficult to assess whether a given coping method is healthy or unhealthy. What may start out as a healthy strategy for one situation may turn out to be maladaptive if it is used all the time (Hauser and Bowlbs, 1990). Functional and dysfunctional coping may depend on how effective the initial appraisal was in differentiating the perception from the reality of the situation. Individuals' appraisal of coping options versus their

actual choice of coping strategy might also influence the effectiveness of coping.

Dysfunctional coping generally occurs when there are perceptual deficits or a deficiency in coping resources (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). Overall, Hauser and Bowlds (1990) felt that emotion-focused strategies are less effective coping methods since they tend to treat the symptoms of distress rather than the actual causes.

Age, pubertal maturity and cognitive development are all factors that influence the development of coping strategies. As one advances in Fischer's (1980) skill theory concept of cognitive development, thinking becomes more abstract and individuals are able to view situations through multiple perspectives and increase the number of potential coping strategies, particularly appraisal, anticipation, and cognitive problem solving (Hauser and Bowlds, 1990). Compas, Malcarne and Fondarco (1988) found that in adolescence, emotion-focused and cognitive coping increased with age. In another study Frydenberg and Lewis (1993) found evidence that older adolescents tended to use tension-reducing strategies like taking drugs and drinking and engaging in self-blame. On a more positive note, older adolescents resemble adults in the fact that they have a larger range of coping strategies, particularly problem-solving ones (Hauser and Bowlds, 1990).

Perhaps the most adaptive of the emotion-focused strategies is that of seeking support, which is seen as the key to adolescent emotional health. Conversely, a disruption in an adolescent's support groups may have an extremely detrimental impact on the adolescent's health (Hauser and Bowlds, 1990). This not only inhibits possible coping strategies but also damages self-concept.

The view that self-concept and coping are related to one another is somewhat new in the field of psychology. Offer, Ostrov & Howard (1981) felt self-concept was divided

into five aspects: psychological, social, sexual, family, and coping selves. Others have recognized that self-esteem is related to coping styles with high self-esteem resulting in active coping. Because there have been so few studies, however, it is not known which comes first -- active coping or high esteem -- or are they synonymous concepts (Elkind, 1984)?

As Compas (1987) noted, self-efficacy is an important aspect of emotional well being. Self-efficacy relates to how individuals perceive their own capabilities. It is not enough to possess the skills of competent coping, one must also believe that one has them (Frydenberg, 1997).

Clearly self-concept and self-efficacy are important aspects of the ability to cope. Hauser and Bowlbs (1990) have suggested that there are four pathways in ego development that strongly affect coping patterns. A *severely arrested* individual is one who has continued for years to use simple cognitive skills and response to situations in either/or and black/white type options. The *steady conformist* is intensely concerned with acceptance and conforming to peers and social rules. He is not very aware of individual differences. Although this is typical of the conformist stage of adolescence, there are times when late adolescent individuals under great stress revert to this behavior.

The *accelerated* individual is at a higher, post-conventional ego stage. He bases decisions on inner standards, has increased autonomy from parents' views, and is capable of handling complexity and contradictions. The *progressive* individual can switch between all the pathways. It was noted that the arrested individuals used problematic adaptation like detachment, rationalization, and displacement, whereas the accelerated individual used empathy, objectivity, and intellectuality.



Coping is manifest in resilience and behavioral competence. In defining resilience, Rutter (1985) claimed that the trait was “characterized by some form of action with a definite aim in the sort of strategy of how to achieve the chosen objective” (p.607). Achieving objectives demonstrates a sense of self-esteem and confidence as well as the ability to cope with change using a large set of social problem-solving approaches. These problem-solving approaches need to be bolstered by stable and close relationships. The resilient adolescent is able to distance himself from events that are uncontrollable. Finally parents must model effective coping techniques to demonstrate to the adolescent that coping has important consequences (Frydenberg, 1997).

Just as resilience and competence can bolster an individual’s coping ability, there are many factors that may inhibit positive coping attempts. Because family dynamics provide an important context for developing coping skills, divorce can be particularly hard on adolescents. Very often males and females adolescents coping with divorce will resort to the emotion-focused strategy of disengaging from the family (Hetherington, 1989).

Positive parental bonding has proven to promote positive coping styles. With this in mind, Kraaij, Garnefski, Jan de Wilde, Dijkstra, Gebhardt, Maes and ter Doest (2003) conducted a study on 1310 18- year old students to look at the effects of parental bonding and cognitive coping strategies on depression symptoms. Failure to engage in normal parental bonding or highly controlled bonding made adolescents more vulnerable to emotional problems. With regard to coping, the study supported the conclusion of Compas, Malcarne and Fondarco (1988) that the way in which adolescents cope with stress is highly related to their well being. Cognitive coping styles of self-blame,

catastrophizing, and rumination had a direct relation with symptoms of depression and anxiety, while positive appraisal had a inverse relationship to depression and anxiety. When studied together, coping processes seemed to be more predictive of depression than bonding styles, which indicates that cognitive coping styles may mediate bonding and depressive issues.

There is one coping strategy that is not a process, but rather an end in itself: suicide. Sometimes an individual will see this as the only coping strategy left when hopelessness rises as other maladaptive efforts have failed to work. Although females attempt suicide more often, males are twice as likely to succeed. To quote Frydenberg (1997), “Big boys don’t cry: they just kill themselves” (p.146).

The discussion of risk factors and negative coping may lead one to believe the stereotype of adolescence as a time of storm, stress and severe psychological turmoil. But most of the evidence points to the opposite conclusion. Only 10-20 percent of adolescents experience severe emotional disturbance. This is about the same percentage as adults with psychological problems (Arnett, 1999).

#### *Gender specific coping styles*

Not only are males and females in Western culture taught different ways to cope, they face similar but not identical stressors. Fights with friends and bad grades in school could certainly be two similar stressors for late adolescent males and females. But both of these situations present five times more stress for females than males. Girls also find problems more complex than boys, and they often consider themselves the source of the problem when boys do not (Seiffge-Krenke, 1990). Both of these behaviors, as well as the fights and poor grades scenarios, are probably more problematic for girls because

they are continually bringing relational issues into problems, making them more complex than they need to be (Seiffge-Krenke, 1990).

In general, girls tend to use more emotion-focused coping strategies than boys do. On the positive side, they tend to seek help and emotional support. But on the negative side, girls continue ruminating about a problem long after it is over. Girls also report undergoing more stressful events than boys, in addition to experiencing these events as more stressful. In late adolescence most of these events are in the interpersonal and family domains (Compas, 1987).

Because of the negative coping strategies and the perception of multiple negative events, girls are twice more likely to experience depression than boys. Although there may be some biological reasons for this, most of the depression may be seen as a result of ruminating about depressive emotions and their symptoms. This causes a mood spiral of depression and rumination feeding one another. When they are caught in this spiral, girls are unable to attend to the current situation and often use these defective strategies to turn against themselves (Frydenberg and Lewis, 1993).

Seiffge-Krenke & Stemmler (2002) found that males were more affected by major life changes than females, whereas females were more affected by minor stressors of relational issues. Although avoidant patterns of coping supported the females increased rates of depression, there were not significant gender differences in the use of avoidant coping.

Because boys do not tend to think along relational lines as girls do and are socialized to be “tough,” it is not surprising that their coping styles fall along stereotypic lines. Late adolescent males are more aggressive and private and take more risks than

girls (Frydenberg and Lewis, 1991). When hypothetical coping problems are presented to boys, they tend to ask more questions and get into alternative activities like sports to reduce tension physically. Although posing additional questions positively aids coping by promoting problem solving, the reduction of tension is not always positive. Certainly, when they turn to sports to alleviate tension it can be very positive, increasing their endorphins and warding off depression. But too often boys tend to fend off tensions by resorting to substance abuse. This is also one of their coping methods in social situations. Because they don't often have the same degree of interpersonal skills as girls, boys will use denial more and try to suppress social problems more than girls. Again, use of alcohol and drugs often seems a ready-made tension reducer (Peterson, Sarigiani & Kennedy, 1991).

Although girls seem more prone to depression, boys outnumber girls in loneliness. Roscoe and Skomski (1989) surveyed 559 students (average age 20.4 years) to find out which gender experienced more loneliness and how they coped with this condition. They recognized that situational loneliness typically hits late adolescents of both sexes hard. This is due to the separation from parents, the search for intimacy, and the change in peer groups when going to college and when entering graduate school. The coping pattern used most often to deal with this feeling was a self-defeating withdrawal into solitary activities.

Males and females differ in their locus of control, with females seeing control over events as external as they rely on others, when males rely on themselves. This is evidenced in adolescent girls placing more emphasis on peer popularity than boys. The

reverse side of reliance on others for boys is that they seem to have less trust and greater difficulty in seeking support of others.

Despite the lack of support from others, boys have a healthier response to difficulties in their lives than girls do. Where boys see changes in their physical and social worlds as challenges to confront actively, girls will withdraw and take a resigned coping position. These latter positions do not position girls well for maximum adjustment (Frydenberg, 1997).

In an effort to observe possible cultural differences in coping, Olah (1995) conducted a cross-cultural study with both genders at age 17-18 and found that girls used more accommodative coping and boys used more assimilative solutions. However both genders seemed to use assimilative strategies for low or medium levels of anxiety and used avoidance at high levels.

The three-A model they used in Olah's study outlined three types of coping:

1) *Assimilative* concerned participants using their own cognitive or behavioral efforts to change the environment for their benefit. (Types typically mentioned in other theories that meet these requirements are problem-focused, task-oriented, constructive, confrontative, information-seeking, problem-solving, and seeking social support for information and primary control).

2) *Accommodative* coping is the participant's using cognitive or behavioral efforts to change himself to adapt with the environment. (Examples from other theories include emotion-focused, emotion-regulative, person-oriented, self-adaptation, self-control, acceptance, passivity, seeking social support for emotional reasons, and secondary control).

3) *Avoidant* coping relates to the participant's using cognitive or behavioral acts to leave the situation physically or psychologically. (Examples from other theories include escape, behavioral disengagement, cognitive disengagement, escapism fantasy, self-isolation, alcohol-drug disengagement, and active forgetting.)

Without using the particular word "coping", Tezer and Demir (2001) introduced a set of conflict behaviors that follow similar pathways as coping strategies. The five conflict behaviors were competing, collaborating, compromising, avoiding, and accommodating. *Competing* shows high concern for self and low concern for others. *Collaborating* indicates high concern for self and others. *Compromising* reveals intermediate concern for self and others. *Accommodating* indicates low concern for self and high concern for others (Thomas 1976).

Results indicated that late adolescents showed different conflict behaviors based on the relationships involved. With parents, the undergraduates showed high avoidance and accommodating with little compromise. However, there was much compromise and little avoidance with close peers. Females used compromise with friends, whereas males used competing.

When dealing with the same or opposite sex, males reported more competing with same sex friends and avoiding behavior with female friends. The males, compared to females, had more accommodating behaviors toward both male and female peers. Females used more conflict strategies than males, showing their stronger social skills.

At first glance this data might cause one to think that males are stronger than females in coping skills. Females certainly tend to take interpersonal relationships more to heart and often bend to others' desires. However, it is important to remember that the

avoidant coping style, in which drugs and alcohol are seen as viable solutions, is more synonymous with males. Loneliness is higher in males, as are successful suicide attempts. So though males can use the physical outlet of sports as a positive coping response, the negative coping methods are potentially deadly.

Late adolescence is a time of crisis for most individuals in Western Culture. Both identity and career aspirations are undergoing examination and questioning, even as the difficult process of individuation is occurring. For the gifted individual these crises are intensified when experiencing emotional overexcitability. Coping patterns that might aid non-identified late adolescents may differ for the gifted late adolescent, as he is often more androgynous. So the coping patterns and problems that face females may relate more to him than to the non-identified male.

Studies conducted have examined gifted late adolescents, not specifically identified as emotionally overexcited, in areas of achievement, suicide, adaptability, mentoring relationships and participation in gifted programs. Although adaptability and mentors can be seen as coping methods, no attempt has been made to delineate the experience of the target age and gender population who are high in emotional overexcitability, nor the specific ways in which they cope. This study attempts to provide answers to the questions of how gifted, late adolescent males experience and cope with emotional overexcitability.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODS AND PROCEDURES

#### *Theoretical Framework for the Study*

This study examines the experience of emotional overexcitability of gifted, late adolescent males, and the ways in which they cope with their experience. Although overexcitability and coping have been the topic of several quantitative studies (Berndt, 1982, Miller, Silverman & Falk, 1994), these studies have failed to get at the actual experience of feeling intense emotions and the resultant methods used for coping with these intense feelings.

Piechowski (1979) developed an Overexcitabilities Questionnaire, which asked open-ended questions aimed at bringing to light the experience of all the overexcitabilities. He and other researchers have used the answers to some of these questions to show evidence of emotional overexcitability. However no one to date has done a study of the target population (late adolescent males) in an attempt to understand the subjective experience of emotional overexcitability for this group. The quantitative studies done on emotional overexcitability have dealt with such issues as how does IQ relate to overexcitability, or how do age and gender relate to overexcitability. These studies seek to explain in a numerical fashion how often emotional overexcitability can be expected to appear when other variables are changed. The variables can be manipulated to arrive at the different projections.

Human science is the study of meaning that is presented through qualitative means. In human science, which Van Manen (1990) used interchangeably with phenomenology, or more precisely hermeneutic phenomenology, researchers seek to



describe, interpret and analyze what we see. There are a variety of approaches one can use in qualitative research: symbolic interactionism, phenomenology, hermeneutics, ethnography, critical inquiry, feminism, and postmodernism. Essentially, the approaches are similar in a number of ways. They are all concerned with the experiences, opinions and feelings of their participants. The data occur naturally rather than being manipulated as one would in quantitative research. The data is viewed in a holistic manner rather than being reduced to a set of variables. The understandings generated through the research are used in an inductive way, rather than the deductive method of quantitative research (Van Manen, 1990).

Many qualitative research studies use a small sample of specific groups and utilize one to one interviewing versus the large random sampling and survey type data used in quantitative research. This technique leads the qualitative researcher to present a rich and intensive look at the small subgroup of the population. The results are not necessarily applicable to a large group, but can convey a detailed understanding of what it is like to be an individual in the specific group interviewed.

Phenomenology is also described as a philosophy of the unique. Yet Van Manen (1990) talks of portraying universal essences. He states that, “a universal or essence may only be intuited or grasped through a study of the particulars or instances as they are encountered in lived experience” (p.10). This begins to explain how phenomenology differs from other human science disciplines. It is not the study of culture, as ethnography looks at this element. Nor is it the study of an individual, as one might see in case studies. It seeks to elicit the meaning of experiences in our everyday lives..

When successful, a phenomenological description will cause us to shake our heads in agreement as we recognize an experience we have had. In this way, phenomenology does something to us, rather than us doing something with it (Heidegger, 1962). The aim of phenomenological research is to make us more aware of universal experiences. It also aims to “edify personal insight, contributing to one’s thoughtfulness and one’s ability to act towards others. . .with tact” (Van Manen, 1990, p.7). Further, it aims “to construct a possible interpretation of the nature of a certain human experience” (Van Manen, 1990, p.41).

When attempting to describe what it is like to experience intense emotions and how to cope with these emotions, it is only possible to look at an individual’s subjective view. There is no one right way to experience or cope with an emotion, nor can the intensity of such be measured in a quantifiable way. Hence, the only way to describe the experience is through qualitative means.

A primary purpose in doing this study is to explore and describe the experience of emotional overexcitability from the perspective of a late adolescent male so that other adolescents, teachers and parents might understand what the phenomenon feels like. Equally important, however, is understanding and interpreting how that experience is ameliorated through coping methods. Hermeneutic phenomenology provides the best framework for examining the lived experience of individuals experiencing emotional overexcitability.

### *Participant Selection*

There is a relatively new term for young people who are still dependent on their parents or others for support, known as *late adolescence*. Ellicott and Feldman (1990)

describe this period occurring from eighteen to the mid-twenties, for those who are delayed in entering adult roles because of financial and/or emotional need. This and other studies (Parsons, 1942, Keniston, 1971, Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson & McKee, 1978, Arnett, 2000) looking at this period, have established that the post high school years constitute a distinct developmental period that seems at least partially different from adolescence.

Many people believe that gaining independence from parents and creating an individual identity are the most important tasks of late adolescent development (Arnett, 2000). This period often extends beyond the college years until one has decided on an occupation and ideology. For these reasons, the participants I chose were individuals who were still dependent on others for financial support and had failed to yet achieve full individuation. Individuation is described as a sense of one's distinctness from others. Because the individual must take great responsibility for the self, autonomy grows as individuation is achieved. It is during late adolescence when the individuation is dominant (Josselson, 1980).

The second and most important consideration in choosing participants was the presence of high degrees of emotional overexcitability. High levels of emotional overexcitability can be measured, for predictive purposes, by using the Overexcitabilities Questionnaire II (see Appendix A). This 50 item Likert scale measures all five of the Overexcitabilities that could possibly manifest in gifted individuals. For my purposes, I have selected only those subjects who fell into the highest quartile of the emotional portion of the scale. The particular statements from the OEQ II directed to uncovering emotional intensity are as follows:

- I feel other people's feelings
- It makes me sad to see a lonely person in a group
- I can be so happy that I want to laugh and cry at the same time
- I have strong feelings of joy, anger, excitement and despair
- I am deeply concerned about others
- My strong emotions move me to tears
- I am moved by beauty in nature
- I can feel a mixture of different emotions all at once
- I am an unemotional person (scored in reverse)
- I take everything to heart

In theory, this questionnaire should have worked well as an easy means to find high levels of the overexcitabilities. I did not find this to be the case. The gifted late adolescent males I tested were nominated through network sampling. This is a strategy where each participant is nominated by another individual (LeCompte & Preissle, 2003). My three eldest children are in the late adolescent stage, are gifted and emotionally overexcited. In finding participants, I relied on my daughter and two sons to nominate friends who they thought had similar traits. I had thoroughly informed them of the traits of emotional overexcitability, and had confidence that the individuals they selected would score in the 75 percentile in this area of the OEQII.

In fact, only one of the five participants scored in this quadrant. The original questionnaire was given to fewer males than females so the score was not proportional for males. It should be noted that 68 percent of the score had been determined by female responses so this raises questions about how applicable the instrument is for males (Falk,

Lind, Miller, Piechowski & Silverman, 1999). Its true measure for males was not reflected in my five participants. In an effort to gain a true appreciation of what their answers indicated, I questioned them each individually and orally to assess where they actually fell in the scale. By the answers I was given, I found that one participant scored all the questions with a low score because he felt that the questions sounded “gay.” For several others, a question such as “I feel sad when I see a lonely person in a group” was answered in the negative. This was because the participants felt that they had often been the lonely one, and that if they saw a person similar to themselves, they felt confident that they could forge a connection. Other questions were not given the most positive score because the participants were comparing their emotions with that of girls they knew, who were more demonstrably emotional. When I asked each individual why he had answered each question as he did and had him explain his reasoning, I then rescored each questionnaire and found the participants had scored in the highest percentile for emotional overexcitability.

Given the considerations described above, the participants were 20-26 year old males, identified as gifted in their K-12 experience, and tested for a 75 percent predictive validity on the OEQ II of having highly intense emotional experiences.

#### *Number of Participants*

Originally I had planned to include four participants in this study for several reasons. In a pilot study I conducted, I used two adolescent males with similar IQ's, but varying scores in the Overexcitabilities Questionnaire II. In writing up their experiences, I found only one common theme. This theme was significant enough to be of interest as a finding, despite other dissimilarities between the two. However, I thought that four males

with similar scores on the Overexcitabilities Questionnaire II would allow for more similarities among the subjects. Kvale (1996) maintains that in a psychological interview situation where general knowledge is obtained (similar to Freud's case studies) several intensive interviews are appropriate. Upon interviewing my participants, I found that two were not as able to express their emotions as the other two. Accordingly, I recruited one more participant to assure that I had enough rich detail for the composite description

### *Data Collection*

#### *Interviewing*

The interviews took place in a private location of the participant's choosing. Participants are most comfortable in familiar surroundings that are judged to be in their own "territory." Yet three of the interviews were conducted in my home, and two more in a hotel conference room. The other interviews took place in a participant's home or a school common area.

The interview format was the most appropriate data collection method for the phenomenological study. As Kvale (1996) states "the qualitative research interview is a construction site of knowledge production: its purpose is to obtain knowledge of the phenomena investigated and any change in the interviewed subject is a side effect" (p.78). A phenomenological interview is characterized by being an informal, interactive process. The researcher typically has crafted a small number of open-ended questions aimed at getting the respondent to present a full and rich description of the experience under examination. The majority of the talking is done by the respondent, with intermittent questions or paraphrasing by the researcher (Van Manen, 1990).

In the first interview each participant was asked to choose a pseudonym to protect his or her identity in the study. I then explained the concept of emotional overexcitability fully. I presented the participants with a list of the characteristics of the different overexcitabilities (see Appendix B) and asked them if they connected with any of the descriptors. I then went over their answers to the questions posed on the Overexcitabilities Questionnaire II. This gave me a chance to get to know the participants a little better, and let them know what I was most interested in discovering about them. It turned out to be a very necessary step in being able to accurately score their answers to the questionnaire. This also was an important step in establishing an atmosphere of mutual trust and respect that was necessary for future data collection (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2000).

After going over the questionnaire, I had prepared a list of questions to help focus the balance of the interview. This list not only allowed me to organize the interview process, but also directed each of the participants to share comparable experiences. The questions were as follows:

- Recall a time in the recent past when you experienced a negative emotion.
- How did it come about?
- Tell me about your experience.
- How did the experience, or your reaction to it, affect significant others in your life?
- What were your emotional responses to the experience?
- What bodily changes were you aware of during your experience? (Moustakas, 1994)

A few of the questions I posed were taken from the original 56 item Overexcitabilities Questionnaire:

- What has been your experience of the most intense pleasure? (During the pilot study I discovered that intense pleasure was almost as commonly mentioned as intense pain, when describing emotional overexcitability.)
- What do you do when you feel poetic? Describe.
- When you ask yourself “Who am I,” what is the answer? (Piechowski, 1974)

Although the answers to the Overexcitabilities Questionnaire are normally given in written response, I felt that after establishing a close rapport with the participants, oral responses were easier for them to give and more readily available to follow-up, probing questions that amplified responses.

Emotional overexcitability is best understood as the sum of its parts. Although depression is a common emotion experienced by individuals high in emotional overexcitability, particularly in late adolescence, so too are anger, elation and frustration. The inherent definition of emotional overexcitability is that the individual is bombarded by various emotions at a high intensity. For example, May Sarton (1970) a highly gifted female, expressed her experience of emotional overexcitability saying “I feel too much, I sense too much, am exhausted by the reverberations after even the simplest conversation. But the deep collision is and has been with my unregenerate, tormenting and tormented self” (p.12). Therefore, the experience of emotional overexcitability cannot be understood by separating out only one emotion felt, such as depression or sadness. The person high in emotional overexcitability must deal with a multiplicity of emotions. The questions proposed, then, began to illuminate the experience of emotional overexcitability.

I employed several approaches to avoid common mistakes when interviewing individuals with high emotional overexcitability. For example, it would have been a



mistake to select only one emotion for interviewing late adolescent males. Experts concur that this population often substitutes anger for sadness, as it seems a more socially acceptable emotion for males (Gurian, 1998, Pollack, 1998, Santrock, 1999). This provided another reason for asking questions about negative emotions as well as intense pleasure. By asking both I was able to encourage the participants to address the full range of emotions with which they are bombarded.

As is indicated in an open-ended question interview, when necessary I asked clarifying questions or directed the participant to be more specific in answering. Both of these techniques allowed me to verify the accuracy of the participant's response and bring it into sharper focus. In addition, in a phenomenological interview the dialogue tends to be circular, with the questions emerging from the course of the dialogue rather than from a pre-determined path (Moustakas, 1994).

The fact that I am a 55-year old woman, likely the age and appearance of the participants' mothers, appeared to enable the young men to feel comfortable being interviewed. Pollack (1998) references the ease with which boys can talk to their mothers relative to other individuals. It seemed that there was a certain degree of transference that took place and made me appear an empathetic, maternal listener.

My demeanor during the interview was important in encouraging the participant to keep talking. By being open, non-judgmental and interested as I smiled, nodded when appropriate and maintained good eye contact, I indicated that he was proceeding in a way that was advantageous to both of us. I allowed for silences, as they frequently provided time necessary for further self-reflection that led to fuller self-disclosure. But I had clarifying questions ready to break prolonged silences so as not to cause the participant

distress and this led to more detailed and deeper disclosure. I avoided making any rationalizations or recommendations, as both were inappropriate for the purposes of the study and might have caused the participant to end his self-disclosure. (Stewart & Cash, 2003). Although I attempted to listen without prejudice, the hermeneutic approach to interviewing asks that the interviewer listen to multiple layers of meaning. Questions can then be asked for clarification, which led to greater validity. (Kvale, 1996).

### *Photo elicitation*

Photo elicitation is a research method that asks participants to use a camera and take photographs that illustrate a prompt given.

At the end of this first interview, I gave three participants a 24 exposure, disposable, 35 mm. camera with the instructions that each take photographs that illustrated the statement: "How my emotions affect my life." The other two participants used their own digital cameras for the assignment. Also at the end of the first interview, the participants were asked to reflect on some of the issues that had been brought up during the first interview when they were at home, or any other emotionally fraught situations that they might think of in the interim before the second interview. I gave the three participants with the disposable cameras money to develop the film so that the participant and I could look at the exposures together when we met for the second interview. The other two were to bring their cameras and share their photographs with me on the screen.

Photo-elicitation is a different approach than those commonly used to elicit self-disclosure. In experimenting with this technique during a pilot study, I discovered that there were many personality attributes exposed during the photo-elicitation that had not

been divulged during the first interview. Participants seemed to appreciate the time to reflect on their emotional lives, and the creativity that was required of the project. Gurian (1997) states that “Boys need stories to give them internal, reflective language for their feeling experiences” (p.207). It would seem that photo-elicitation, like stories, would give the participants the “internal, reflective language” they needed to self-disclose their feelings.

Walker (1999) found that photographs were a means to “engage thought, extend the imagination and to undermine the implicit authority of the written word” (p.21). He found that photographs carry a qualitative voice of their own. The photographer has not just addressed technical problems in taking a photograph, rather the photos “often appear as moral dilemmas, concerned with selection, framing, judgment, risk and making one interpretation rather than another” (p.19). He also believed that using photographs as a self-disclosing device serves as a “can-opener effect”, easing the way for the photographer to talk and bringing about a closer relationship between the researcher and the participant.

At the second interview, participants were asked to give detailed descriptions of the photos they had taken. ( See Appendix C.) Probing and clarifying questions were used to check for validity and to provide triangulation of data with feelings that had been previously disclosed (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2000). Several of the participants found ways of expressing real emotion through their photographs using metaphoric images to explain important aspects of their personalities. Others were much more literal in their picture taking, and revealed less.

A third interview was conducted after the interviews were transcribed and analyzed. I e-mailed each individual his personal textural-structural description as well as the composite textural-structural description. I asked the participants to check for validity in seeing if the two descriptions rang true for them. Basically this involved verifying that the experience and coping methods described matched what the participants had experienced (Van Manen, 1990). I then debriefed them by explaining Dabrowski's Theory of Positive Disintegration, and gave them an opportunity to reflect on where they were in their own development.

### *Data analysis*

All of the interviews conducted were tape recorded, and I took notes to make record of any special facial expressions or body postures that seem to reflect emotions. I also made careful notes on the interview setting (Kvale, 1996).

I transcribed all the interviews myself so that there was a uniform method used in the transcription. I used verbatim responses, and made note of any emotional affect (i.e.: laughing, sighing, changes in tone of voice, and length of all pauses in response). Using the participants' verbatim responses was one method of staying in the lived experience (Thompson, Locander, Pollio, 1989).

In analyzing my data, I tried to accomplish what Moustakas (1994) describes when he speaks of phenomenological research as "the process (that) involves a blending of what is really present with what is imagined as present from the vantage point of possible meanings; thus a unity of the real and the ideal" (p.27)

The process of analysis in phenomenology is rigorous, in spite of the absence of "hard facts." Rather, I let the data speak for itself (quite literally) and then intuited what

this implicit data had to say explicitly. I found the Van Kaam method of phenomenological analysis most effective when analyzing my pilot study data. Although narrative analysis (analyzing stories told in the dialogue) yielded interesting results, the graphic language describing emotional experiences was not found in stories. Open coding analysis yielded a rather cold listing of elements found in the experience rather than giving the more substantive descriptions that emerge from the Van Kaam method.

The Van Kaam method described in Moustakas (1994) aims at arriving at the unity of the real and the ideal by subjecting the data (gathered through open-ended interviews) to a series of steps. Through horizontalization, the researcher finds each expression of the experience under investigation. I used an orange marker to indicate the experience of emotional overexcitability and a pink marker to indicate all coping experiences. For example, in the pilot study, one participant talked about losing control of his body, his mind and his freedom. There were multiple quotes that attested to each of these issues. In horizontalization I underlined each quote that spoke to these issues.

The next step of analysis is reducing the expressions found in horizontalization to their invariant constituents. This is done by eliminating any expressions that are redundant or that fail to be fully understood or labeled on their own merit. For example, the participant previously referred to repeatedly made the statement that he was overwhelmed. Through invariant constituents, I deleted any expressions that failed to provide new information as to how he was overwhelmed.

Invariant constituents are then clustered by themes. I wrote the themes in the margins of the transcripts next to the pink and orange markings. For example, the overall

themes of being overwhelmed were loss of control in 1) thought 2) relations to others 3) unjust situations 4) overwhelming feelings and 5) bodily reactions.

Based on my findings, I presented a thematic portrayal of the experience of emotional overexcitability by giving individual textural descriptions for each of my participants (using their verbatim transcriptions). A textural description provided the “real” experience of the subject. An example of a textural description of loss of control in relation to others is “Feeling strongly is a double-edged sword. I think it makes me more aware of people around me... I have a knack for picking up subtle things in others. But I feel isolated in that I don't know if people feel things as strongly as I do.”

After preparing the textural descriptions, I used “imagination variation” (Moustakas, 1994, p.99) to present a structural description of each participant’s experience. This process required the use of intuition to identify the essence of the experience, or the “ideal.” The structural response to the previous example was, “When feeling cut off from others, it is primarily because he perceives that his experience is unique from those peers around him. It is his very emotionality that allows him to see others in a penetrating way, but keeps him separate from them.”

Following the listing of the structural descriptions, I put the textural and structural descriptions together for each participant in order to unify the real and the ideal. Although there were many significant commonalties between participants, I made a composite Textural-Structural description of all five of my subjects to arrive at a more universal understanding of the experience. This involved using some experiences that not all the participants had revealed. Thompson, Locander and Pollio (1989) described the way in which a universal understanding came about:

After each transcript has been interpreted at the idiographic level, a new part-to-whole phase begins in which separate interviews are related to each other and common patterns identified. These patterns of commonalties are referred to as global themes. Identifying global themes across interviews is another methodological means for improving interpretive vision (p.141).

This global vision was important because the research, while aiming to make a unique lifeworld explicit, was also aiming to provide some universal meaning. (Merleau-Ponty, 1973). Van Manen (1990) spoke of this further when he stated that “the essence of experience has been adequately described in language if the description reawakens or shows us the lived quality and significance of the experience in a fuller or deeper manner” (p.10).

Although I did not generalize, as such would be against phenomenological traditions (Van Manen, 1990), I did make the unique experiences more accessible to our understanding and responsiveness. As Van Manen (1990) stated,

Phenomenological human science sponsors the progress of humanizing life.... to help humans become increasingly thoughtful and thus better prepared to act tactfully in situations. . . It invites a dialogic response from us (p.21).

Heidegger stated this similarly when he highlighted that the question is not whether we can do something with phenomenology, but whether phenomenology can do something to us (Van Manen, 1990). By presenting the experience and coping methods of the participants, we can come to some conclusions about how to support positive growth in our emotionally intense, gifted late adolescent males.

Consider an analogy that demonstrates how individual and unique examples can come together to make a universal essence of experience. Suppose one were to look at a tree. One person can see it from many different vantage points, as the person walks around the tree. Another person, also walking around the tree, might give different descriptions, particularly if one person were an arborist and one a carpenter. A third and fourth person would have even more varied descriptions of the tree. Phenomenology then reports the individual descriptions, giving the unique interpretations of the tree for the four individuals. But after thematizing the descriptions, the whole experience of the tree is given, relating a more universal understanding. Each person participating in the tree evaluation would respond to the overall description, even if he had not contributed some of the descriptive elements. Some of the elements may have been taken for granted by one or another individual, yet the full composite description provides a presentation of the tree as if it were being experienced for the first time. It has been presented in a pre-reflective essence. This explains the apparent contradictions posed by Van Manen (1990) when he describes phenomenology as “relating the particular to the universal, part to whole, episode to totality” (p.36).

#### *Checking for validity*

It may be that when one remembers an experience, there is a blending of real and imagined circumstances. For positive experiences, this could represent a blend of the real with the ideal. In negative experiences, it could be the real with the dreaded. Phenomenology allows for these blendings. We are not to separate fact from fiction. Experience is a state of mind, so what is only imagined may well be experienced as if it were real (Moustakas,1994). Therefore, when we look for validity in phenomenology we



are not seeking confirmation that every act or feeling actually occurred. The fact that elements entered into the participant's awareness is enough to make them a part of his overall experience. The only validity we seek in phenomenology is whether the textural-structural composite descriptions ring true as something that is universally felt within all the participants. For this verification, I asked each participant to read and respond to the individual and composite Textural-Structural descriptions. Each of the five participants found that the composite description fit with his self-image.

#### *Control of Researcher Bias*

I have lived through the emotional experience of my own as well as that of my sons and students. I have a first-hand witness of the ways in which each male coped with his emotional overexcitability. In so saying, one might conclude that I have preconceived notions of how one experiences and copes with emotional overexcitability. However, I have also seen that there are variations among my students, my participants and my sons that make the experience and coping strategies of each unique. This gave me a broad perspective with which to approach the topic. I could assume that the experience of each of my participants was unique. The passion I have for the topic, however, served me well in being empathic to the participants' data, in both collecting and reflecting upon it. In order to account for my subjectivities and biases, I bracketed (Husserl, 1970) my knowledge by placing it outside of my awareness as I gathered the information. I did this by meeting with a colleague trained in qualitative research methods and discussing possible subjectivities, biases and presuppositions. Once they have been identified and discussed, I strived to set them aside when interviewing and interpreting the data. This way, when I listened to the participants answer questions, I tried to understand their

meaning rather than impose my own meaning (Thompson, Locander & Pollio, 1989).

Bracketing was particularly important for me as I have a good deal of first-hand knowledge about the intense emotional experience of gifted adolescent males.

## CHAPTER 4

### PARTICIPANT DESCRIPTIONS

#### *Jim*

Jim was a twenty-one year old man, just one week away from college graduation, when I first met him. His straight blond hair fell below his ears and half way down the back of his neck. His long bangs were held back by a black felt bowler hat that he wore throughout the interview. The only color on the hat was a perky yellow and green feather that rose up from a band around the base of the hat's crown. His bright blue eyes were clearly visible from under the hat's brim.

As he entered the room, his five foot eleven inch frame stood in contrast to the ten-speed mountain bike he was pushing. In addition to the hat, he wore a button down stripped shirt tucked into his jeans, and a blue, loosely woven scarf was carelessly thrown around his neck. All in all his attire seemed a conscious decision of a casual, yet semi-formal man.

At the time of the meeting, Jim was living in his girl friend's basement. He was between rental houses and enjoying the time when he didn't have to put together his monthly rental check. Jim's father paid for his educational expenses, but living and eating expenses were Jim's responsibility. During his last year in college he held down three jobs that brought him to a forty-five hour work week. His first job was as a cook in a small burger and submarine sandwich restaurant. He also worked in the food services area for his college, basically trying to keep institutional food warm. His final job was as an assistant to a professor who taught a course in food preparation. Jim cooked in the seminar kitchen, tutoring students in chemistry and biology on the side. He had made a

conscious effort to keep all his jobs related, and cooking was something he very much enjoyed.

Jim grew up in a small northern town located in the central part of the states. He was the middle child, having brothers both two and a half years older and younger than he was. His parents divorced when he was ten years old and it was a traumatic time for him. “At first they had this ridiculous idea that we should be shuttled back and forth on a regular basis, which was really bizarre because the environments were so different.” They had this exchange every two weeks. Then Jim’s mom moved an hour away to her childhood home and Jim and his little brother went with her. The older brother stayed because he didn’t want to leave the town. “And then four weeks later I wanted to go back home too. I was having a lot of frustration with my mom and brother. That was when closing myself off started up.”

Aside from this brief period of time when he felt frustrated with his mom, he said he was:

Closest to my mom, for sure...she had a positive role with emotion in my life.

She also had a lot to do with my education. That’s probably where I felt the most frustrated and disattached (sic) and misunderstood.

Jim’s education started at a small, private Christian school. In the first grade he was selected to join a small group of students who were working at an accelerated pace. Admission was based on school performance, however, there was no gifted program. So in the third grade his mom pulled him out of the school in favor of a public elementary school that offered more options.

My mom had a pretty strong will about trying to find things that were appropriate for me. And we kept trying but I really didn't get into anything that was satisfying.

He recalls a teacher who told him to stop going to reading class and instead go to the library to make up his own projects. He met with a gifted and talented counselor several times, but nothing came out of the sessions that personally affected Jim in terms of academic work. He imagined that the interview had just been for research purposes.

The option to skip sixth grade was presented but Jim wanted to be a sixth grader. He ended up advancing a year in junior high because he was always working a year ahead of his classmates. Since there was no gifted and talented program, they didn't know what to do with him. "I was more like a hassle or a problem."

Jim attended three different high schools: one was medium sized, one large, and the final one was very small. It was a school of environmental studies. There he was able to take creative classes in poetry, video and music. He was also deeply involved in ecology.

Designing his own projects in elementary school served well in preparing him for the small northwestern state university he attended. It was a very open school where just one, in-depth course was taken per semester. Jim, however, often took two. He graduates with majors in biology and chemistry. But Jim stated that, "my identity is too big. I'm not sure if I'm a science student or an art student and I have a week to graduate."

Jim's poetry is an attempt to unite the science student with the art student. He takes facts of science and relates them to a more abstract world as in the following:

the whole world  
and everything in it  
was  
and is  
wordless; tangible  
and unspoken  
Speech  
and everything written  
symbolizes not matter  
but abstraction itself  
-dissolved the world  
into human thoughts  
where it was digested  
for 100,000 years  
before hardening once again  
as wordless nature  
without symbol  
without distinction  
That the very light  
which illuminates everything  
can be broken into  
particles, photons  
described, calculated and  
quantized  
whilst remaining  
wavelike, ephemeral,  
Indistinct from the  
very threads of reality.  
It is a matter of  
phase.

During the interview, which took place in a conference room at a northwestern hotel, just blocks from one of Jim's jobs, Jim was very serious. He seldom smiled and was very intent on his responses. He remarked that the interview had come just in time as he was currently working on his emotions. He thought quickly and always presented thoughtful, succinct answers. He seemed comfortable and expressed himself freely. Although I had only spoken to Jim on the phone to arrange the meeting, the fact that he

was a good friend of my son appeared to enable Jim to feel comfortable sharing his thoughts with me.

### *Edward*

Edward is a 20-year-old sophomore at a highly regarded Southern state university. Lacking both a car and ample free time, the interviews were arranged at his locale. The first interview took place in a conference room in his dormitory/apartment complex. Edward met me in the lobby before taking me up to the appointed room.

There was an easy grace that was reflected in Edward's movements. At five feet eleven inches, he had to look down at me, but conveyed a polite regard for me with "yes ma'am" frequently prefacing his remarks. Although not having a classically athletic build, Edward was obviously in control of his body, evident from a finely developed musculature.

He had ebony skin that served as a beautiful frame for his shiny brown eyes and noticeably white, straight teeth. His fine black hair was cut very short, emphasizing his square face.

In the first interview Edward wore a thick, white crew neck tee shirt and a heavy pair of sweatpants that were trimmed down each leg with red cording. At the second interview he wore a hot pink polo shirt tucked into a pair of khakis. He seemed immaculate in each outfit, and obviously took pride in his appearance. He is usually dressed in suit and tie during class time. But these interviews caught him coming from dance and going to work.

At the second interview, necessity forced the meeting to be held at the front desk in the lobby of a dormitory. There were frequent interruptions by people checking in or out DVD's. It was a very public place for a private interview.

Edward had little free time. He had a heavy class schedule as an accounting major and he danced for two different companies, one Black troupe and one multicultural. His involvement with these companies, in addition to his serving as treasurer in one, takes up at least 15 hours per week. In addition he has a job on campus with the Youth Community Assistance where he sits at the front desk in the lobby, and goes on rounds visiting residents to see how they are doing.

His work in academia also goes beyond his course load. As a leader in the National Association of Black Accountants, he mentors 30 freshmen and sophomores to help them get on the right track in business careers. As Edward remarked,

It's just important for me to take positions like that because I need to make sure that the door to opportunities is still open. If I can go through the door, I need to make sure the door is still open.

In addition to all these activities, Edward still finds time to participate in a leadership program within the College of Business. Top grade business students are selected to participate. Edward benefits from his membership in the group because,

There is just a sense that those people are going through the same thing that I'm going through and they're developing just like I'm developing. And they have weaknesses like I do. I feel real comraderie with this group. We sit in a circle and talk about what makes us mad and sad.



Life was not always so rosy for Edward. He grew up in a dying Southern city as part of a middle class family. His father is a production manager for a national manufacturing company and his mother is an administrative assistant for a high school. He spent little time with his siblings, as his sister is 17 years older and his brother is 14 years older. In essence, he was raised as an only child.

Public school was not a kind environment for Edward when he was young. The darkest skinned of his companions, he was made fun of because of that trait. In addition, his unexpectedly fine hair was ridiculed. To add insult to injury, he wore glasses and was deemed a nerd because of his intelligence. He earned the name “Beaver” because of his teeth, before braces.

In the fifth grade Edward was finally nominated for the gifted program. Yet he continued to be an outsider. His friends found that he played the violin and took dance classes and life continued on a downhill slide. Finally in junior high school Edward auditioned for a Fine Arts Magnet School and was accepted. Life started to look up.

I was finally among people who were as smart as I was, and they enjoyed the violin and dancing too. It was a completely different environment. I had good friends. Getting my braces off and getting contacts certainly helped things too.

Edward is close to both of his parents. He would tell them anything. But they were very restrictive with him, something that he appreciates now. When it comes to strong emotions, however, he credits his mom. “My mom had a very active role in my life, more than my dad did. So I guess that female influence fueled the compassion in me.”

His childhood as well as adult life was and is greatly influenced by his Pentacostal church. He attends church regularly and considers God a confidante.

In spite of the very public setting of one of the interviews, Edward seemed relaxed and open in both interviews. He would pause for a long time before answering a question, and then come up with one, very specific response. He did not seem ready or able to elaborate on his emotions, however, and it was unclear why this was so.

### *Dan*

Dan at age twenty- three, stood six feet three inches and towered over me. His broad shoulders and chest revealed a well proportioned, fit body honed through years of playing soccer. His yellow polo shirt fell loosely on his frame, and draped over a pair of khaki trousers. His feet sported a pair of tan deck shoes.

His dirty blonde hair was close cropped and carefully trimmed around his ears. Although his face was square-jawed, there was a softness to his appearance, likely because of his gentle green eyes and warm smile. All that was topped off by his soft voice, frequently punctuated with “yes, ma’am.”

There was a slight argument about where the interviews were to take place. Dan was insistent that he should drive the forty cross-town miles to my house. After rigorously persuasive arguments, I was finally permitted to make the trek to Dan’s house.

The house was a two-story split-level brick house lying in a town on the far outskirts of a major southern city. The town’s claim to fame is a civil war battleground and a small state college, which Dan attended. He was renting the home with his girlfriend.

It was evident that the couple had just moved in, as moving boxes were stacked in a hollow at the base of the stairs awaiting trash day. The sparsely furnished living room held a worn sofa and a single lamp rested on a wine crate that had been turned on its side. A big, friendly golden retriever made the room feel like home, as he rested against Dan's feet throughout the interviews.

Dan had grown up in an affluent suburb of a major southern city. He lived in the same neighborhood throughout his life, until he moved out to attend college. He was first identified as gifted in the sixth grade, although he never thought about it and seemed surprised that it held an interest for me.

Dan was the youngest of three children, with a brother five years older and a sister two years older. His sister and Dan were good friends until she got to be a teenager. Then she started to become a bully. His brother has always been, and still is, a bully. He got beaten up by both of his siblings. "And that's why my mother and I developed a close relationship, because I would always run to her."

The relationship Dan has with his mother is a central element of his life. He related his ability to be sensitive to his mother. It was also central to his non-relationship to his father.

My dad's a real selfish guy. His father beat his mother. They sent him off to private school. He was molested when he was young. He had a weird childhood. He never really had a father figure. I had a father, he provided. But you also need to be kind of friendly with your kid . . . I still hold it against him that he didn't ever spend much time with me . . . He kind of makes me feel like I don't know what I'm doing, like I'm an idiot. He talks down to me.

When Dan finally asked his mother why his father-son relationship was so bad, his mother immediately replied that it was because of the close relationship Dan and she shared. His father was jealous. As Dan described, “she’s my favorite person on the earth and she tells me I’m the same to her. So I can talk with her more about stuff.”

Dan recognized some of his strengths.

I know I’m a good guy. I’m nice. I feel that I was brought up pretty well and I have good manners and whatever is important . . . I saw all the mistakes (my brother) made and I never made one. My sister during her teen years made it hard for my parents. I never wanted to do that . . . I just didn’t want a bunch of trouble . . . I’ve never been arrested. I can’t say that for a lot of my friends so I’m doing something right I guess.

Although he’s not close to his father, he’s very close to his maternal grandfather and uncle. During his first year of college, Dan lived with his grandfather as his grandmother had just died. It meant going to a small rural college for his freshman year. It had been Dan’s idea to make the move. “My grandfather and I are very close now, and my uncle and I are best friends.”

Dan’s father is a contractor and his mother is a high school teacher. But when Dan was ready to start his sophomore year of college at a large university where a lot of his friends attended, “something happened to my father’s business. I told them I’d move back home and work just to help out financially.” It meant he missed two semesters of college, and that affected him deeply, but Dan is all about helping out.

In spite of recognizing some good qualities in himself, Dan seemed deeply humble. And he's not afraid to express his emotions. As a frequent visitor to my home, Dan seemed relaxed and open with me.

### *Turtle*

Turtle is a twenty-five year old, young man whose hippie-like appearance belies his strong, sensitive and intelligent nature. His reddish blond hair parts in the center and falls in tight waves down to his shoulders. He alternately wears it loose or drawn back in an elastic band. His lean and angular face is softened by the curly hair when it is worn down. He talks quickly, has a ready wit, and laughs frequently. His jeans and loose fitting shirt seem appropriate attire for his job as the director of an after school program in a prestigious southern suburb. Although employed full time, Turtle lives with his father, as he is bidding time until he does some traveling and returns to graduate school. He plans to pursue a career as a history teacher.

Turtle's early history involved a lot of moving around. He started elementary school at a public school in New Jersey. Then in the first grade he moved to the Midwest, only to return to New Jersey the next year. He stayed there until fourth grade. He was first labeled gifted in fourth grade when he moved to a public school in a city in Georgia. He stayed in gifted classes through sixth grade where he attended a public school in a wealthy Georgia suburb. He hated his sixth grade year. As he said, "I was a mean kid that year. That was the closest I've ever come to being a bully. I was never a bully before or after that. And that was when the depression started."

Because his sixth grade year was so bad due to lack of friends, he was moved to a small private school that went through the eighth grade. Both this school and the private

high school he attended were known for allowing creative expression. In Turtle's words, "There were no gifted classes because the schools were run like a gifted class."

He attended college at a small state university in the Pacific Northwest. At this school too, creativity was the guiding principle. Students only took one in-depth course per semester. Student and teacher evaluations took the place of grades.

Although Turtle's parents were together in his childhood, according to him they were never happy. "I told them to get a divorce and they didn't think I was taking it seriously. But I knew what divorce entailed. And they're happy now. They're good friends." Turtle's father ended his career several years ago as a chief financial officer for a huge national corporation. He is now retired. His mother teaches kindergarten at a small private school in an affluent Georgia suburb.

Turtle has a brother who is three years his senior. They have never been particularly close as his brother is "generally emotionally unavailable." He flunked out of college during his freshman year, "And he's been drifting from school to school ever since. He's got emotional difficulties, depression."

The most recent injury to their relationship came six years back when his mother was diagnosed with cancer. When she got cancer "he just called one time during that year, and that was to ask for money." Although he was able to forgive his brother for screwing up and beating me up all those years" he found his treatment of their mother unforgivable. Although Turtle says he is now working on forgiving his brother.

Although both Turtle and his mother would prefer that he live with her, for both emotional and practical reasons, he lived with his father so as not to wake his mother when he comes home late at night. She is enrolled in night classes and then teaches early

each morning. She apparently is a light sleeper. When asked who he was closer to, Turtle immediately replied, “My mom, for sure. I love my dad. I respect him and we get along well. But he isn’t emotionally very attached.”

What makes Turtle’s dad’s house so undesirable, aside from the dad’s emotional detachment, is a grandmother in residence whom Turtle finds “disgusting.” This disgust stems from her personality. “She’s just rude. She thought I was gay for a long time, and would give me girl’s cards for my birthday. She’s also racist. And politically we’re at opposite ends of the spectrum. She’s the most depressing person I’ve ever met in my life.” In spite of all these negative feelings, Turtle nightly walks her to and from the dinner table, settles her into her chair, gives her her pills and puts on her oxygen, and gets her cookies.

As an interviewee, Turtle seemed very relaxed. He chose to come to my house, located several miles from the school where he worked. The interview took place in a small, upstairs room that was set up as a quilt room.

Turtle sat up straight with the ankle of one leg resting on the knee of the other. He would lean forward over his crossed leg when he was particularly involved in the topic at hand, and lean back to laugh at himself or a situation he found amusing. He knew me fairly well as he is best friends with one of my sons.

### *Michael*

Michael opened the door to his apartment with two boxer dogs barking and jumping around him. He invited me in while he excused himself to go shut the dogs in a back room. They were out sight, but the barking continued until one of the dogs was let back out. He remained quietly on the sofa sitting next to Michael.

The living room of the apartment he shared with his girlfriend was simply furnished. There was a couch resting against a wall with tables flanking either side. A square coffee table sat between the couch and a small table holding a television. The dining area, with a small round table and four chairs, opened off to one side of the living room and a kitchen ran along next to the dining area. It was separated by a half wall that ran behind a counter top.

In spite of his six-foot frame, Michael did not give off the impression of being a strong presence in the room. His white Nehru shirt was buttoned up to the neck and fell straight down over a pair of faded jeans. His jet-black hair, slightly grown over his ears, stood in stark contrast to his pale complexion. His hazel eyes rarely met my eyes, but rather stayed averted.

Michael sat next to me on the couch with a respectful distance maintained between us. His gaze was usually directed at either the dog on his side, or at an unseen object on the wall opposite the couch. He was never at a loss for words, but he spoke with little emotion. He rarely smiled during the interview. His air was mostly somber and somewhat flat. Although his speech became more rapid and animated as he spoke of intellectual issues.

Michael grew up on an affluent island off the coast of North Carolina. When he was in the third grade, and his sister in the first grade, there was a reversal in fortune, which caused his family to move to a large Southern city. It was at this point that both Michael and his sister were identified as gifted and enrolled in gifted programs.

He remained in the city until the seventh grade when he moved to a prosperous suburb. His high school experience was at a small private school, known for its openness



to free expression and teaching styles. He went to a prestigious southwestern university that his father had attended.

Michael's father had been in real estate and building. They had a one-income family. At the time of the interview Michael was twenty-six. His father had died suddenly a year and a half ago. His mother was still trying to figure out what to do to earn a living. In addition to the death of her husband, and having to move out of a house and into an apartment, she also was coping with problems related to her family of origin.

When asked if he were closer to his mother or father, Michael responded:

I guess I would say I was definitely closer to my mom, except for my choice of schools. Which isn't to say that I was closer to my dad. I mean we talked. But I don't know how much there was to be close to in terms of verbal transactions . . . I didn't have as much emotional interaction with my dad as I did with my mom. But I did some things in my life sort of for him, or because I thought he wanted me to do that.

At the time of the second interview, Michael had just broken up with his girl friend of five years and his maternal grandmother had just died. It was another source of sorrow for more than the obvious reasons.

My mom never felt like her mom loved her. And when she went to the funeral she had to come to terms with the fact that the family really didn't want her there. We may not be in the will.

Financial difficulties are definitely part of Michael's overall stresses. He is currently a second year student at a large, southern chiropractic university. Student loans are paying for school and living expenses.

The career in chiropractic is a drastic departure from Michael's former interests. In both high school and college he was a serious acting student. But college seemed to end that pursuit.

I had such a bad experience with theater at college that I haven't even considered acting in a play or anything since my sophomore year. . . I didn't like the theatrical environment at college and so I just shut off and went off into other creative pursuits.

He had graduated with a degree in philosophy.

Although it appeared as if Michael was somewhat disengaged during the interview, he spoke to the contrary. "Whenever I'm comfortable, like I am now, I kind of talk freely and say what comes to mind." This was reiterated in the second interview when Michael came directly to my house from a psychiatric appointment. "I feel like the session in just being continued here."

## CHAPTER 5

### FINDINGS

*Jim*

#### *Experience*

Jim is first and foremost a young man with a strong intellectual side of his character. Yet he has an appreciation for the emotional and artistic. He has yet to find an easy way to connect the two worlds. When asked who he was he responded:

Well I guess I think about my sort of human heritage because you know I feel very much like mammalian organism on a terrestrial planet bounding through space . . . And there is a lot more than just my genetic heritage. I feel like every kind of essence that exists in the universe is probably present to some degree within a human being. Sunlight, stardust, time, space, future, blood, earth, stones, water. But I am more than what I am made of. And the me part is sort of the spaces in between. You know, the connections. It's like it's not just a bunch of brain cells, it's that they are connected and how they're connected and how they work with each other. I think that that's the me, the connections in between.

Jim has separated himself from many of his peers simply because of his intellectual prowess. He lives more in his head than in his heart. This has resulted in his experiencing a good deal of loneliness:

I was really lonely a few summers ago. I do feel really sad when I feel lonesome, or isolated or disconnected to people that I need to be near . . . I do equate sadness with a certain type of loneliness and it's something that affects me a lot.

He brings the loneliness on himself at times because he fails to reach out in spite of his best attempts to do so:

I use words all the time and I'm very vocal, but I have a serious difficulty sometimes really letting my words go. Turning in the paper, mailing the letter, making the phone call. It's really hard . . . I guess I kind of isolate myself.

Being an intellectual first, and an emotional person second can bring about loneliness. And though he doesn't want to trade one for the other, Jim often finds himself choosing head over heart:

I just don't want to ignore people. And I feel like sometimes I get really aloof. And sometimes I feel like it is all or nothing. I don't want to chitchat. I don't want to have a casual conversation. I don't want to go with the flow. Something more profound is going on inside my head and if I can't sit down and really like express these big thoughts then I don't even want to talk. I'd rather be by myself and thinking what I want to think about than chitchat about things I'm not really concerned with just for the sake of having that social engagement.

A large part of Jim's problem with the emotional realm is that he doesn't trust his ability to understand emotions. In fact, emotions seem to overwhelm him in a number of ways:

I'm not comfortable and willing to just completely embrace all my emotions. But there is an intelligence to emotions that some people, particularly females, develop a lot. I feel like I haven't developed that. I have very little control over like really seeing and feeling and communicating my emotions.

Not only does Jim feel that emotions are often beyond his control, he feels they can threaten his intellect:

I don't want to take everything to heart. I wouldn't be able to make my way through and examine if I was just open to everything that was there. I feel like taking everything to heart is almost a direct obstacle to my analytical and philosophical development . . . They're just these emotions . . . they like assault me.

Emotions assault Jim, but they also loom over him as things that are incomprehensible. "Emotional work is just like a mountain. I don't know where it starts or stops or what I'm supposed to be doing with it. It's like huge and it's there."

One of Jim's problems with emotions is the fact that "emotion precedes the thought of why the emotion is there." How can he analyze something that is felt so hugely and amorphously? "It's almost dangerous to me to try to move these feelings down into words. And I feel like it's almost dangerous to trivialize them."

But putting emotions into words is what Jim is constantly trying to do in order to be able to analyze them. It's one aspect of his perfectionistic nature:

I very rarely let myself just be rashly emotional without tying it to intellect . . .

You know I'm trying to reconcile art with science in some way that matters, that people can understand . . . Intellectual and emotional clicking together is something I greatly look forward to whenever I can make it happen . . . I have this great danger of drifting away and I'm afraid of that. I don't want to be solely immersed in nothing but passion, ethereal . . . Rationality is something that is

really important to me. I don't trust my emotions on their own. That's part of bringing them into words or music or even art.

Jim does not make life easy for himself. In his striving to make a connection to all things in life that he believes affect him, he has created an almost unattainable goal. This perfectionism makes him feel like a failure:

Things seem bigger than they really are . . . And a little project for school that I probably don't even have to do, but that will be like where my passion is. It's huge . . . it like grows and grows inside of me like this enormous thing and I have to prove myself to the universe. It feels like it's tied and connected to everything. Like I've been writing this one poem for three months now. It's not very good and it's not very long but it is hugely important to me and I can't let it go. I refuse to turn it in until it is perfect. It has to have all those connections to myself personally, to the history of the world, to spirituality.

When trying to reconcile all aspects of the universe, Jim frequently experiences frustration at not being able to accomplish the task. This is compounded by his perfectionism. "I have a great fear that I'm not learning from my mistakes. And that is really scary. And then I start beating myself up" On one occasion he found out that he wasn't getting credit for a project he had been working on:

I got really disappointed with myself. I kind of flake out and the obstacle itself kind of grows and grows in my mind until I can no longer address it. It's so a little thing like that, in me, plays into a big thing like problems I've been accusing myself of having.

In addition to feelings of negative self worth and failing to achieve perfection, Jim is also afraid of intimacy:

A lot of times when I'm really happy about something, it causes tears. Like being reunited with someone. You know strong feelings of love. It's almost like there's a certain kind of sadness there. Or you know when I'm with someone that's really important to me, I can see how sad it would be to be apart or how real my emotions are and how real my love might be. That is like frightening. And it feels very delicate. I'm kind of scared at all the possible ways things could go.

In addition to lacking the words for emotions, Jim doesn't feel particularly trained in affairs of the heart:

The last few years I've been allowing myself to feel a lot more. I want to open those doors up and its just pouring out and I haven't had training or experience with relationships that are really emotionally sensitive to be about to deal with that or talk about it very well.

Nevertheless, the fact that Jim recognizes his neophyte status in intimate relationships seems to be helping him work out questions about them:

Not all of Jim's experiences with emotions are negative. In fact he seems to revel in both happy and sad emotions. His main goal is to be able to feel, because he shut off his feelings for many years:

The big difference between me now and me several years ago is that I really do enjoy the emotions, even though they are confusing to me . . . I've grown to enjoy the expression. Even if it's something that's accompanied by sadness or anger. A

lot of times it feels really good and I don't enjoy bottling things up and I really try not to.

Actually, Jim sees emotion as a type of art form. Having existed for so long without emotion, its rebirth seemed something miraculous:

Somehow the ability to cry at a movie came back really, really strongly in the last few years. A newspaper will now make me cry. Things are heightened. Music and painting make me just feel things. I want to be aware of other people around me. I want to be aware of what they are going through. I don't want to ignore it in myself at all.

Jim gets the greatest pleasure from the writing and performing words of prose that are like a language he has created to communicate between his two worlds:

To me, writing and performing can reconcile the analytical with the emotional and spiritual . . . I'm presenting some research tomorrow morning and I'm really excited about it. I'm probably going to get that blissful feeling, that relationship that I look forward to.

In addition to a blissful feeling, Jim has a somatic response when he is able to unite the analytical with the emotional world:

I feel lighter, almost anti-gravity. So there is this cooling emotion from my toes up through my head. You know sometimes you can feel like you're smiling inside, like your muscles are smiling.

Jim has other somatic feelings too. He largely remembers them in relation to his parent's divorce, a time of his life that caused him great distress.



I remember sweat on the brow and back of the neck. I felt sinking in the stomach and shaking in my hands . . . I carry stress in my midsection. It's almost like clenching where I bring my knees up. Also a lot of times there is like a pouring of emotions out of the crown of my head. I feel it in my forehead too. I'll try to release it. I feel like I need to like open up the top of my head and pour it out.

### *Coping*

Until two years ago, Jim's primary method of coping with all emotions was to detach himself from them. Perhaps this began with the distressing event of his parent's divorce. Whatever prompted this detachment, it seems that it was unequivocal:

I didn't like the idea of trying to get away from my emotions. I think part of that is from that era where I was intentionally out of touch with my emotions. I felt very numb in a strong way that I found useful for coping with life and building up my analytical sensibilities. But I started to loathe that and I really romanticized emotions, and felt jealous that people could actually cry at a movie.

To this day Jim uses detachment when he's trying to get his schoolwork done. But now it is a conscious decision to detach:

Being a student and having my routines, I've got to maintain a little bit of distance or try to hold back a little bit or I'll be conquered by my emotions. I try to be in control of my emotions all the time. I can see them and let them drift away and maintain stability . . . So it's very important for me to be a bit outside them, especially if I'm trying to get work done.

Being so analytical, which is Jim's primary nature, helps distance him from his feelings. However, he also uses another method to escape emotions:

Even things like listening to other people's music allowed me to remove myself from my local environment. I'd go to my room and smoke pot and listen to classic rock.

Playing his own music was not an escape or a release from tensions, but a way to understand what was going on. Understanding, for Jim, is the best coping devise:

People say playing the guitar is a release. But I'm not sure why because it's more like a brain bringing together. It's like a cooling. I can couple my emotions to movement, sound, and it's not necessarily getting away from it. It's like bringing them out from this ethereal space where emotions exist to like something on earth where there are sounds and words and textures that you can actually sense. I think it is really helpful.

Jim usually feels that he has to express or pick apart his emotions before he can legitimize them or understand them. "I don't think I understand what I'm feeling until I do something with it." In addition to his skillful analysis of emotions, he also uses autopsychotherapy to get to the crux of his issues:

Sometimes I talk to myself. Sometimes I record myself talking. I'll record conversations and listen to them later. I guess it has something to do with memory so I can remember things said. But I guess it involves repetition too. I'll go back over something that I've said or something that has been said to me and I'll hear it play over and over in my head analyzing what it was, what it meant, what to do with it.

A large part of Jim's autopsychotherapy takes place in the form of his journal writing. As he states, "I write to survive." Again, writing is a way of taking what he considers to be ethereal emotions and putting them on paper to make sense of them:

As soon as I start writing, everything comes out and it is all connected and clarifying itself. It makes a lot more sense and I feel so much better even though I'll cry when I start writing. I'll cry and I'll try to push it as far as I can. I know no one is going to read this . . . And then it makes a lot of sense.

Nature has always been important for Jim. He feels a response to the seasonal changes and has "strong empathy for that ecological connection." So it should come as no surprise that he uses nature as a coping partner. This was particularly true when Jim had just seen a movie about world problems and felt overwhelmed by them. He needed to gain perspective:

I went into the woods and I sat down quietly for a long time and there are a lot of little sort of helpless things in the woods. Like watching little ants and bugs crawling along . . . I kind of like details and so when I get into the woods I look at things, like the structure of things. I try to notice smells and engage all my senses. But one part is trying to take my mind off these big human frustrations.

But it reminds me there's more than just the human world.

Like his connection to nature, Jim feels an affinity to the spiritual realm. Yet there is nowhere where he feels that affinity more strongly than in nature. So when he's feeling trapped, he finds a more eternal perspective:

There's like sunshine or sky that's like out and above. A ray of hope or a divine light that's always kind of guiding me . . . You know not letting myself get boxed

in and having a hold of that. It's reassuring. And it's sort of inspiring . . . It's all part of something much bigger and its really reassuring that there is a whole light of me that's kind of a guiding inspiration. Even if it's dark over here, the sun is still shining over there.

Jim is a very bright and analytical young man who is allowing himself to feel his emotions for the first time after a long time of detachment. He wonders if the flood of emotions he feels is normal or whether it is a result of the void in emotions he had experienced previously. Tales of breakdowns and psychologists in his youth seem to indicate that Jim was always very emotional, but he is just now learning how to work with his emotions.

It seems logical, then, that Jim's first response to feelings is to analyze them and give them a language of their own. And he uses his writing and music playing to help him sort these feelings out. Perhaps the best summation of Jim is the response he had to a picture he took of a chalkboard flooded with sunlight:

This is actually the chalkboard that I drew my diagrams on for the presentation. And that's the sunlight coming through and it's illuminating part of the chalkboard and that's very much like using the light of my intellect to diagram and use chemicals . . . Everything is connected and I think I cope, or work with or build upon a lot of the feelings and questions and mysteries of my life by examining things.

## *Edward*

### *Experience*

The two words that instantly come to mind when thinking about Edward are *driven* and *passionate*. As the first in his family to attend college, he is as driven as anyone I have ever met. But his drive and passion come from deeply felt emotions, many of which he experienced as a youth.

Edward was identified as being different at a very young age. As a result, he felt isolation:

I know what it feels like to be lonely. Because before the braces and before the contacts, I wasn't the coolest looking guy in school. And on top of being smart, I was labeled nerdy. And I was so isolated.

This isolation because of physical traits only worsened when his peers discovered his interests:

I would have violin or dance rehearsal after a baseball game and I would keep that to myself. And then they found out that I was engaged in the fine arts. And at that point it would isolate me. They would totally ostracize me . . . They would sit in the back of the bus and just block me and cover seats like there was no room. So I would be forced to go in the front and be by myself.

This questioning of his masculinity evoked a real fear in Edward, who wasn't comfortable being different:

I'm not macho. I guess now I know it's okay to not be macho and still be straight .  
Growing up I thought it was gay to express your emotions. And it made you less

of a man to want to cry or to want to just write or vent . . . That shaped me in hiding my emotions because I had too many emotions.

Masculinity issues and isolation then followed Edward to college:

I don't have too many male friends and I don't think I'm close enough to my girlfriends like that to tell them about my emotional problems because men don't talk about problems like that. They just suck it up.

Edward did have a best friend in high school. However, his biggest hurt came when that friend deserted him after he went to college. It was a reason for Edward to block off his ability to trust:

When you have a best friend for six years and then all of a sudden they're (sic) not there anymore, it was really tough for me. After that I was more hesitant to open up to people. I lay in bed not getting any sleep . . . I was definitely frustrated like, what did I do that was wrong? Have I changed that much that I can't relate to my best friend?

Isolation was the furthest thing from his mind when Edward took an internship position with an accounting firm in New York City during the summer break. He had been actively recruited and felt his talent would speak for itself. But isolation was what he experienced:

They're supposed to teach you how the business works. And I didn't feel they nurtured my development like they should have. And I also didn't feel like they got to know me personally . . . They'd invite people out to bars after work or to people's houses and they didn't invite me. And they didn't give me the work

experience I wanted. They didn't give me assignments that would stimulate my mind and let me achieve that drive that I wanted to and the passion as well.

Edward's isolation deepened as time went on, to the point that Edward saw himself out of step with his peers:

I took a break from work, from my building, from my desk when they were proceeding to make fun of me. And I was walking down the opposite side of the street and it made me feel, Wow. I'm just the opposite from everyone else. I'm not in line with what they want me to be. And I'm just different.

Isolation often leads to frustration, and Edward has had his share of that. He often felt frustrated in his position of being ostracized by his elementary school friends. Yet he felt he had no control over the matter:

When I would get ridiculed, I remember wanting to cry but I didn't because people were there. I remember wanting to scream but I didn't because people were there. I remember wanting to fight but didn't because I would get suspended and my parents would be upset. I remember wanting to transfer schools but my dad said no because I needed to learn how to deal with it. I remember wanting to quit everything that made me happy. I wanted to stop dancing and stop singing because they were unacceptable. I just wanted to be normal.

Edward felt no control in this instance because he didn't see any viable options. On one occasion, he lost control when he chose an option that he had normally ruled out - fighting. A classmate made a remark about Edward's mother, and in response:

I got so angry that I couldn't say anything back. I was just breathing so hard and he pushed me. And then I fought back and that was the only time I fought back in my life.

Edward still loses control, but instead of fighting others, it takes the form of having an internal fight with himself:

When a dance show comes and everyone is calling my name, and I think am I going to mess up? And if I mess up what are people going to think? I can't believe I'm going to mess up because if I believe it I'll do it. Then people aren't going to be excited anymore. They're not going to cheer for me. They're not going to be happy. They're going to take everything away from me. I'm not going to be happy. I'm going to be a failure.

In spite of his inspiring drive, he still can't control the self-doubt that was fueled by his early ostracism:

I take everything to heart. If you say something about me, I'm going to take it personally. I can't control it. I can say that, oh that doesn't bother me. And I can say I'll just let that roll off my shoulder. But I can't stop thinking about it. And it's weird because I cannot not think about it.

Edward can remember one time when he felt true despair and depression. During his teen years he saw his parents as too rigid:

They restricted me so much when I was growing up. They were definitely hard on me. Back then I felt despair because it was hindering my development. I thought, I'm not developing social skills. I'm not expressing myself the way I want to, and



my friends are out having fun without me. And it would get to the point where I would go out anyway when they didn't want me to.

In the end, Edward had disappointed his parents:

I think at that point in my life I was very depressed. Simply because my parents had that much emotional influence over me and to know that they were disappointed in me really hit me hard.

The emotional hold his parents had over him was such that their disappointment prompted depressed feelings in Edward. He had taken control of a situation that he found intolerable, and the result had been disastrous for him:

Depression for me was not wanting to eat, not wanting to talk to friends. And when your friends would call and ask what was wrong, not wanting to talk to them and bottling it up on the inside. Just letting it accumulate, accumulate, accumulate, and not doing what you usually do . . . not dancing, not playing the violin, not being musically engaged. I just didn't feel like doing anything.

The crowning blow to this depression was when Edward felt God had abandoned him. "I guess I felt like God wasn't hearing my prayers because my parents were disappointed in me."

In spite of many negative emotions, Edward's passion has also driven him to feel very positive emotions. He has often felt overwhelmed, but in a very good way. He is energized by his life:

I was feeling overwhelmed (in NYC) because there were taxis everywhere and they were speeding and just making their own lanes. It seemed like they were just zooming everywhere. It was just life passing by so fast and quickly . . . It actually

felt great. I had a lot of adrenaline going on and it was a new experience and I like new things. It was a challenge and I'm driven to rise to challenges.

This same scene, viewed late in his disappointing summer internship, was taken a very different way. "I looked out my window and all I could see was congestion. Buildings right on top of each other. It seemed overwhelming." But this negativity came from working twenty hours a day. Life is usually exciting for Edward.

Another example of being overwhelmed in a positive way comes from a sense of achievement, when his driving passion to succeed comes to fruition:

It makes me so happy that I laugh but when I think about where I've come from it's like, Wow! I'll cry. And the crying is not a sad thing. I've really achieved something . . . When I say I've come this far, it's overwhelming at times.

A prophet in his church also confirmed his achievement. This was another occasion of being overwhelmed in a positive way. So much so that Edward experienced somatic expressions of emotion:

Once (the prophet) prayed for me, and said he had something for me. When he said that, I was so happy that everything I wished for is going to come true because the prophet told me so. I wanted to cry but they were tears of happiness.

But my heart was in my throat. And when I have these feelings I can't speak.

Spiritual joy is the pinnacle of Edward's positive emotions:

I would say when I'm in church and the spirit moves when God is present, I think I feel joy then. Everything seems like I've got lots of worries on my mind, lots of things going around in my head, and all of them cease to exist. And I would say that's extreme joy for me.

The Spirit's presence is a peak experience for Edward, and right alongside it is the feeling of power. Edward relishes power. It is a feeling he gets when doing something that he loves. Dancing is just one example:

The dancing gives me happiness. Power. The feeling you get when you feel really healthy. It just makes me feel good on the inside. And just happiness . . . My most joyous moments have been when I'm on stage with everyone in the crowd looking at me. Me being center . . . And I have bodily feelings. Adrenaline. Like I feel this rush in practices and shows.

Ultimately Edward took center stage during his accounting internship and what had been a primarily negative experience turned positive. It was a time for him to shine, as he recalls:

And then I made a presentation about financial services and that made me feel really empowered to have that authority and to be giving a presentation to a lot of people who were a lot smarter than me on their jobs.

### *Coping*

For Edward, his artistic gifts have been both a source of embarrassment and a source of joy. In his current stage of life, dancing, playing the violin and singing are ways he can express his emotions and cope with the hurts he still encounters. He came to this realization when he entered a magnet arts high school:

And that's when the intensely positive feelings came in. Where I definitely knew other people who loved the violin and I got to experience dance. And I got exposure to singing. It's where I had all the things that make me really happy. A lot of other guys were just like me and I saw that they weren't feminine. They

weren't attracted to the same sex either. I was just okay. . . I definitely think that dancing helps me cope. Just all that physical energy helps a lot with stress and then after that I can go back and pray.

An equally important coping skill that Edward utilizes is prayer. When he was in a position where he didn't trust those around him, praying to God was his only source of release. "I mostly pray [to cope] because I didn't really talk to people here because I have trust issues still. I pray all the time."

Edward also copes with his issues of trust in a negative way through withdrawal: I became less trusting. I would normally have open arms to anyone that I had a relationship with. But after (best friend deserted him) I was more hesitant to open up to people. With my close friends here, they noticed that I was more standoffish, less willing to tell them information about me.

In spite of withdrawing from others, Edward continues to be an empathic individual. Although this could be seen as an emotional experience, Edward uses it also as a cathartic experience, soothing old wounds:

If I see someone isolated (at the dance company) like a new person comes in and everybody yells or makes them feel bad, then it really upsets me. Nobody wants to go near them (sic) 'cause they're afraid they'll just get yelled at. So they're all by themselves. So I make it my mission to go up there and see that they are welcomed. 'Cause when I see them up there alone it brings me back to when I was alone. And I don't like those feelings.

Edward also empathizes with others he comes in contact with doing his job as a Youth Community Assistant.

I think my concern for others is shown there because sometimes these are people I don't know. I know I care for them because when they tell me their situations I can step outside of myself and empathize with them. I can empathize with everyone.

This empathy can be seen as a coping skill because it reaffirms Edward's belief in himself.

Belief in himself is an important aspect of Edward's coping system. Although he still suffers from self-berating thoughts, he tries to counter these every night:

Before I go to sleep, I just lay in bed for about three hours and think. It seems really positive like self-building. I go through a lot of the qualities that make me me and a lot of the qualities that I appreciate that I have and a lot of the qualities that I'm thankful for.

It is this time of self-reflection that assists Edward to continue to be driven. His self-affirmations prompt him to expect more from himself.

Other than self-affirmations, Edward's intellectual gifts have also served him well in coping with crises. During his depression, Edward felt he had disappointed his parents, and prayer wasn't helping. So Edward had to find another way out of his predicament. He chose to use his intellect:

I made a PowerPoint presentation over why I'm a good kid. So I made this presentation about why it was okay for me to be me. They eventually came around. It was good to know that they made an effort to understand me. And my dad said, "Son I'm proud of you." And after he said that I got out of the depression. They weren't disappointed in me anymore.

Intellectualizing doesn't always work for Edward, however, and he has been mostly unsuccessful in doing away with his trust issues. But having another person to trust has been important for Edward in coping with his college environment. He took a picture of someone who broke that barrier for him:

This is a picture of what trust looks like to me. The guy here is two years my senior but he was there for me when I was a freshman. I just really trusted him . . . He trusted me with information that I know he wouldn't discuss with any other people.

Although Edward finds peace in his church, he is able to find calmness in nature. When he was in NYC, he had an opportunity to go to a rural beach area in the suburbs. The trip was definitely cathartic for him:

And here's a picture of beach and sand and grass and trees. You know it's just very beautiful. So I walked off by myself. And this picture reminded me of home, simply because it was peaceful and calm and serenity (sic). I just felt really calm.

In spite of a host of negative emotions and trusting issues, Edward remains a passionately driven young man. His unique strengths have set him apart from his peers and he has alternately rejected and rejoiced in his artistic gifts. A deeply spiritual being, Edward is drawn to that power he can tap into. And he also finds joy in the power that he can draw from his own abilities. He is a multi-talented individual and he is able to use these gifts for coping with the problems he encounters. He rarely allows things to get him down, except when his uncontrollable self-berating takes over. But when that happens, he is able to draw on his God, his artistic gifts, his empathy and the beauty of nature to help him cope.

## *Dan*

### *Experience*

When asked to describe himself, Dan responded with “I’m not really finished . . . but I think I’m a really overemotional person.” That seems like a good description of Dan, but it would be more accurate to include “self-conscious” with overemotional. There is a sense that the issues in his life are overwhelming to him. A good part of this is that he isn’t where he thinks he should be.

I was kind of depressed about being a year behind in college and what was I going to do with my life . . . I thought a lot of things were important and that I had to focus on them all at one time and it overwhelmed me. And then I started thinking about that and things I shouldn’t have been thinking about.

Dan has been depressed for a good part of his life. This has stemmed from the fact that he doesn’t have a good relationship with his father. Every time he tries to have an interaction with him, Dan ends up being emotionally overwhelmed. This is largely because it is a defeating situation over which he has no control. One such telling moment came when Dan and his mom had just entered their home and found Dan’s father sitting in the living room:

He said something to my mom that made me mad. So I said something to him, and he started yelling at both of us. So I said, all right, I’m leaving. And I got in my truck and backed up and as soon as I got on the road I was bawling, screaming, just letting whatever emotions out in myself.

For a long time Dan kept these emotions inside, but as he stated, it “crushed and ruined” him. He still feels that crush and ruin today because “I still think about my dad

and sister always making me feel inferior. And I still hold things inside to some extent, especially with my dad.”

“Holding things inside” is problematic for Dan. He carries tension in his jaw and he noted, “My jaw bothers me whenever I try to hold things in all the time.” Being a southern gentleman, there are often other aspects of himself that he holds inside as well, particularly anger.

Dan seems to have some significant reasons to feel angry, specifically a father who constantly berates or ignores him, and a brother who is a bully. Of his father Dan said:

If you stick up for yourself he gets so defensive. He like bucks up and starts yelling . . . He’s a very violent man. . . And it’s sad. Sad that I can’t talk to my dad and have some discussion . . . And sad because he is that way. So I try to push that all aside. I guess it came up in my dreams though.

Dan releases the anger he feels for his father in dreams. “Like I’ll be walking into a room and I’ll jump on my dad’s head and start to bash his head in.” The further problem with pushing aside emotions is that when anger comes, it doesn’t stop, and then Dan feels out of control. “I would hit holes in the wall. I would never hit someone though.” But the anger takes its toll on both Dan and the walls.

Anger is largely internalized when it comes to Dan’s brother as well. In one story, the older brother was throwing rocks at Dan over an argument about their dogs. Dan’s mother was also within reach of the rocks being thrown. Dan was understandably angry:

I’ve always wanted to beat my brother up. He’s like a big guy. He’s way heavier than me and he could crush me. But every time he does stuff like that I want to



just knock him out, boom, just do it. But I don't ever do it. I've wanted to, but I shouldn't and I haven't.

Often Dan turns that anger and frustration against himself so he feels depressed and suicidal. He also tends to berate himself and takes everything others say to heart. As he admitted:

I'm very hard on myself . . . But I take everything seriously. My sister would say something like, "Why are your teeth so big?" And for a long time I thought I had big teeth. I was so self-conscious about it. But they weren't that big. I never thought, "Oh she's wrong." And that's just one of many circumstances where I constantly critique myself.

Dan's depression and suicidal thoughts came most strongly when he was living with a group of friends in a university town. He felt like he was being "sucked in" by a group of people who did little but drink and play video games:

I felt really lonely. Even though I had a girlfriend. She would want to go do something. But I was around them so much that I just got to the point where I started shoving everyone away. And I wasn't smoking or doing anything like that. But I was around them so much that it was getting to me. I was allowing it to push into me. Even though I fought hard not to be like that. I was really lonely. I had friends and we could go out, but there wasn't any satisfaction. It seemed like the same thing all the time. I hurt inside really bad . . . I have never felt so much mental pain. My mind was going crazy and I realized what it was but I couldn't do anything about it. For a month I thought about suicide every day.

This extended period of depression would partially explain Dan's intense feelings of empathy for others, although his empathy was well established before the suicidal thoughts began. Perhaps it was the years of paternal abuse that caused his deep concern for others. Dan feels that he was taught to be caring. But the kind of empathy he displayed goes beyond anything that could be taught.

Like if I'm around my friends and someone is upset about something, I don't know how many of my friends would do a lot of things that I do. I'll ask, are you all right? Most of my friends don't care or don't want to show that they care. And I'm not worried about it. I'd much rather them get it off their minds 'cause it helps to talk about it. And I guess that they just think it's not their place or they think they'll show they're not strong or masculine. I don't mind . . . I like people to be happy. If there is a small thing I can do, then I'll do it. I'll go ahead and smash a banana and rub it all over my face if it helps.

What may seem to be the behavior of a clown is really much deeper. Here is a young man who is self-conscious about many aspects of his body and looks, yet is willing to wear banana on his face if it helps relieve someone else's pain. It is an empathy that transcends the norm.

If there is anything that shows learned behavior in Dan's caring about others, then perhaps it is the sense that he should always help others. This came to the forefront when Dan was constantly picking up and driving his brother wherever he needed to go after his brother lost his license due to several arrests. Dan realized that "sometimes people walk all over you. My older brother always did that, I finally realized. But for a long while I had a hard time saying no."

Dan has learned more than just being able to say no to someone who constantly took advantage of him. He has also learned, at least to some degree, that he cannot change his father. With this knowledge, Dan is beginning to experience some emotions that had eluded him for a while. Instead of just crying out of frustration and anger, he is now moved to tears by tender emotions shown on T.V. or at the movies:

The weird thing is, for my whole life if I got into an argument with my dad I would cry. I just couldn't help it. But I wouldn't cry at movies or things on T.V. Now I don't cry when I argue with my dad. But now I cry at movies. They both kind of happened at the same time.

### *Coping*

Although crying is an expression of an emotion, for Dan, especially in his early years, it was also a form of coping. As Dan stated:

Growing up I just cried so much I would hide in my room. I would even close the door and cry and cry. And then as soon as I stopped crying I would say, I've cried about it so I don't have to think about it any more. I'm just going to hang out with my friends or just play video games.

Crying didn't solve the problems, but it helped to push them away for a while.

Just as crying served as both an experience and a coping mechanism, so too did empathizing with others serve both purposes for Dan:

If my friends were going out to have a good time and one of my friends was upset, I would stay home with him. If he's not going out then I'm not going out. And when someone would talk to me about what was bothering him, I wanted to be with him. I think I want to help people because I always got so upset with

myself inside, that it felt good helping other people's problems instead of dealing with my own . . . For a while I didn't have to deal with me. But as soon as I was done helping, I'd start thinking about everything with me, so it was kind of a distraction.

Empathy also seems to serve as a balm for past wounds:

If I see someone lonely, I would try to help them so they won't go through what I went through. Like if they hadn't reached the point that I had reached, I would try to help them avoid reaching that point so that they could find happiness.

While crying and empathizing both served as ways to push away emotions for a while, Dan is involved in other forms of escapism that seem to transport him for longer periods of time. Guitar playing seems to serve the purpose well:

I'm doing this and I forget about what was bothering me or what I was doing in the first place. And it wasn't because of anything other than playing the guitar . . . After I've been playing for ten minutes or more I can feel all the tension that built up in the music and I feel tingles up my back.

Another form of escapism for Dan is playing soccer. It seems an even better method than playing the guitar, as it fully occupies his mind.

When I play soccer, I take it seriously. Like if I play my guitar, I'm still thinking about why I am playing this song . . . But soccer is the only thing I do that makes me just not care.

The only self-destructive form of escapism that Dan engaged in was taking painkillers, barbiturates or Valium.

I would go to school on them and completely not even know what was going on. I never got into trouble for it. Everybody says I would fall asleep in class and somebody would come get me and take me to the next class.

This behavior lasted only a year. Dan tried and rejected drinking as he didn't like feeling sick. Marijuana was out because it made him too paranoid. It was his sister who finally got him to move beyond the pain pills and marijuana:

I just don't like it anymore. You sit around and don't do anything. My sister also started giving me books to read which was another pleasurable experience. Good literature about actually living your life and getting excited about what's going on around you instead of taking something to make you think you're getting excited . . . I think that what I'm reading, I can actually do.

This form of bibliotherapy took hold of Dan in another way as well. It became a sort of autopsychotherapy when Dan looked to his beloved John Lennon for ways to cope with his father-son conflict:

I read John Lennon's autobiography. He was more of a troublemaker, but it was a good book . . . He's my favorite Beatle and I'm crazy about the Beatles. I was kind of sad that he was killed. But after listening to his music over and over, I started realizing that no matter whether he is dead or not, his music is still there and his message. And through his music, I can get that. And it makes me feel good that he was alive 'cause in a lot of ways I can connect with him. He didn't have a very close relationship with his dad . . . He was also emotionally scarred by that.

Another form of autopsychotherapy that Dan practices is drawing:

Drawing is a release for me, but it also makes me think. It helps me get out emotions but whenever I draw I see my emotions on paper. It's kind of letting me know what I think of certain things. So it's still a release but when I go back I know why I drew that.

The final form of autopsychotherapy Dan uses is self-talk:

I can't talk to my dad about us because he gets so defensive. But I'll just talk to myself, and in my mind I'll discuss things and work them out instead of just pushing them aside, 'cause I've learned that they don't go away.

Self-talk has now progressed to talking to others:

Now I try to find a person I can talk to if something happens. I've always talked to my mom. Now I can talk to my girlfriend without worrying about getting yelled at.

Dan has come to realize that people even beyond his mom and his girlfriend will talk to him:

Most people are not like my dad in the sense that they will talk to you even if it is something that they did wrong and you're upset. They still talk to you about it . . . But it's a really good feeling knowing that everybody's not like my dad. It feels good to have a productive argument.

Verbalizing his hurts is a clear step forward in coping for Dan. He has even been able to speak honestly to his brother.

I've always had a lot of built up anger at my brother. Now I'm not afraid to let him know that . . . He always expects me to back down and now I don't anymore.

Verbalizing has become not only therapeutic, but also pleasurable in relation to Dan's newfound interest in school.

When I go to class I feel better about everything. Like I went to class and I learned about stuff and I came home and read some more and it stuck. And if I go somewhere and somebody says something that I just learned about, it feels cool to say I just learned about that. It feels really good to be able to talk to someone.

Dan's last quote raises two questions. How could a gifted person have just come to this realization about learning, and what did he do with his friends if not talk? First, Dan's self-esteem was previously so damaged that he failed to have any self-pride before now. Second, it seems that Dan has two types of friends: those with whom he does activities and those very few whom he talks to about himself. Dan seemed surprised by his friendship with an old high school classmate:

He was kind of a personable guy. He would tell me what he was going through and I would tell him what I was going through. We didn't use to be friends in high school. He's probably one of my best friends now.

One of Dan's best ways of coping is his new ability to reach out for his own needs and make a connection. He has this connection with his best friend, his girlfriend, his mom, John Lennon, his dog and his uncle. Dan's maternal uncle is everything his father was not . . . He takes Dan hunting and fishing and the two really talk to one another. They feel the strong connection that is absent between Dan and his father:

To me, my house is my uncle's house. 'Cause whenever I go down there I'm always welcome and everyone is excited to see me. And when I go home my

mom is excited to see me, but my dad is just . . . He'll be in the basement or he just doesn't say anything.

Dan's one other coping method was to go and see a psychiatrist when he was feeling suicidal. He was able to work a number of things out and could have adopted some of the coping methods he uses from this doctor.

In spite of being insecure and self-berating, Dan is an extremely sensitive, emotional and caring young man. What he has done naturally for others in talking with them about their difficulties, he is now doing for himself. He also finds others to help him do this. He has gone from feeling "crushed and ruined and defeated" to becoming a champion for himself. He went from a young boy who just didn't want any trouble to a young man who is able to rise above any trouble in which he finds himself. In Dabrowskian terms, he has used his emotionality to become an even more moral and self-actualized person

### *Turtle*

#### *Experience*

Turtle is a young man trying to make sense of himself. He is multi-faceted and trying to determine which aspects of his personality best define who he is:

I'm in constant turmoil with myself. A part of me is very rational and part of me is very emotional. Part of me is kind of aggressive and part of me is passive. I feel like my goal in life is going to be to find a balance between the two . . . I am someone trying to come to terms with who I am.

The problem is that on two days out of seven, Turtle is depressed. He has tried taking anti-depressants but chose to discontinue using them.



I'll never go back on them. They left me like a robot. I remember that I didn't feel sad but I didn't feel happy either. Just level. And that was a terrible feeling. . . I don't want to ever feel that again. But I still get depressed.

It seems obvious that Turtle suffers from a chemical imbalance, but his depression often takes on the form of being overwhelmed.

I was sad all day yesterday. I woke up feeling really down and tired. I was tired all day yesterday. I just felt like I wasn't going to get through the next two months of my life. I felt overwhelmed even though everything I have is pretty modest.

Although Turtle was not depressed the days of the interviews, it was clear that he still felt overwhelmed. He reported that the depression emerged from the fact that he didn't have a girlfriend with whom he could discuss things, though he talks of having friends whom could presumably fill that role:

Not being in a relationship is really difficult for me. Because I really like that companionship and having that one person I can be there for and have them there for me. But at the same time I'm trying to make it a good thing for me to try to be emotionally independent right now.

Turtle also seems to have been overwhelmed by global problems, even as he is consciously trying to get them out of his mind. He doesn't feel he can cope with too much on his mind, particularly problems he has no way of solving:

People are trying to crush that in me. Because when you're young you're like passionate about things, like global warming is happening. But what can you do about it? You can't spend all day thinking about these problems or you'll be crushed by it.

Sometimes overwhelming feelings are good feelings, so good, in fact, that they make Turtle cry:

Friendship has made me cry more than most things. Like experiencing a really, deep moment with someone else has brought me to tears. I feel too much happiness, and too much closeness and just too much . . . You know you want it to be a little bit less because you just can't take it all in at once and process it.

Turtle can't help but empathize with people; it happens without his thinking about it. But oftentimes that empathy, too, overwhelms him. One such instance took place recently when he empathized with one of his campers.

I had just learned that a camper was being abused by his drug addict mom and he couldn't get away from her. And I went downstairs, went down the mountain and just collapsed. I was just sobbing my eyes out for about an hour and then they found me. . . I felt it coming all day. Just like you feel it start to build up in your chest and eyes. I crashed so hard . . . I was just out of it.

In another example of Turtle feeling empathy, not only did he feel overwhelmed, he felt a total lack of control.

When I see someone sad and lonely, even in a picture, I experience sadness myself. And there's almost something I'm trying to overcome just because I'll be really happy and I'll see someone really sad and that immediately brings me down. It's hard for me to stay independent of that. That's really something I'd like to consciously overcome if I can . . . I feel like I've lost myself into someone else. Just lost a degree of my ability.

Although Turtle seems to have overcome his need to worry about global issues, he remains a worrier to a degree that is out of his control. And this degree of worrying takes place on a daily basis.

I definitely worry about different things than most people. I worry when I get into the car because I don't want to die in a car. I worry about my mom being lonely, about my dad not being social, about my brother who is depressed. I really worry about myself not meeting the expectations and goals that I set for myself. Repetitious and overwhelming worries are particularly strong when Turtle is worrying about himself:

I'm constantly dealing with myself. I'm self-involved. Like I have problems sleeping unless I have a T.V. on or something. Otherwise I just lay there and think. And I worry about tomorrow and I worry about yesterday.

For Turtle, being overwhelmed and out of control are synonymous. He is unable to keep his emotions in check. Loneliness, too, is often out of his control, but he experiences it in a different way. "Loneliness almost feels like a weight. It makes me feel like I don't want to do anything. It kind of takes the breath away from me."

Loneliness was a constant companion of Turtle's for the first twelve years of his life. But there is one particular instance that remains in his mind:

I'll never forget this memory from the fourth grade. There was a bunch of kids playing kickball and I was sitting on top of this wooden structure playground thing. And I saw my teacher looking at me and seeing that she was sad for me . . . I think I was kind of lonely but then I saw her expression and it became very real.

Although the severely lonely years Turtle experienced through seventh grade are over, and now he has many friends, the loneliness has not disappeared. “I still get lonely, definitely, especially recently. I’ve been very lonely since I moved to town. I’ll just get stuck with lonely thoughts.”

Being alone is not a good place for Turtle to be. He tends to berate himself constantly and part of that is isolating himself when he would rather be soothed by someone else. He is consistently too hard on himself:

I don’t want to be near other people when I’m upset because I don’t want it to get to other people. You know you’re about to cry and someone comes up and says, how are you doing. I’ll just look at them and think, you don’t want that. You don’t want other people to see you as an emotional wreck . . . I guess part of me wants somebody to rub my back but part of me is just like, I need to figure this out before I do anything

In addition to isolating himself, he also blames himself for other peoples mistakes. He won’t berate them, but he will berate himself:

I generally don’t feel really bad towards other people if there is a problem with me and someone, like if we’re in a fight, I usually don’t get upset with someone. I’ll get upset with myself.

In all this self-berating, there is a real element of masochism. When asked how long he normally would stay down and what that’s like, he responded:

It depends on how bad it is. A week or two of really being in the gutter. Ya, I’ll focus on it ‘cause I’ll want to suffer. I want the pain of focusing on that . . .

Generally at times when I’ve failed myself I just want to be present in that . . .

Even if someone really close to me fails me in a pretty significant way, it's a lot easier to deal with than when I fail myself.

In addition to the mental turmoil Turtle experiences, he also has somatic symptoms when he is particularly upset:

I feel tension in my fists. I'll clench my fists and start pumping my jawbone. I'll start curling my fingers a lot. I'll start pumping my forearms . . . Like I'll crack my back and stuff. And I crack my knuckles all day . . . I also get really, really tired . . . Sometimes my stomach aches. It will almost be like I'm hungry and then I'll eat and then my stomach will just be upset . . . It will just feel bad.

In spite of all these negative feelings in Turtle's life, he does have pleasurable moments. He generally gravitates towards experiences that are calm and peaceful, like skydiving or scuba diving.

It was just very calm when I jumped out of the plane. I didn't want my adrenaline pumping because I wanted to remember it really clearly. It was so peaceful and quiet, except for the wind blowing by you. It is just beautiful.

Most people would find skydiving and scuba diving as risk-taking, adrenaline-inducing activities. It is interesting that Turtle experiences death-defying activities to be serene.

Perhaps it has something to do with his suicide ideation.

### *Coping*

Since a large percentage of Turtle's time is spent in depressive or worried states of mind, one would hope that he would have a vast repertoire of coping methods . . . and he does. But not all of them are healthy. In fact, one is deadly: suicide.

In the sixth and seventh grades, Turtle was having a particularly difficult time in school. Having his mother upset at him for supposedly smoking pot exacerbated that. As a result, he felt he had few options in his life:

I suffered from depression and at that point I tried to commit suicide a number of times. I tried almost every way possible except for a gun. I tried slitting my wrists and lighting myself on fire. I got hospitalized for two weeks because of that one. . . I went into fits of depression . . . screaming, crying, throwing stuff and then ultimately trying to kill myself.

Distressingly, the days of suicidal thoughts are not over for Turtle. To this day, he still considers it one of his options:

To be totally honest, there are days when I'm telling myself, I should just kill myself. I'll wake up in the morning, and not feel depressed, but it's like easier. I'm so tired. It's like waking up in the morning and keep feelings these emotions, and keep doing the same things over and over again . . . Like why keep going through the same thing?

Another harmful, though not fatal, coping mechanism is detachment. But this is not detachment from himself as he finds that hard to achieve. This is detachment from the people who are in a position to help him.

There are times that I am emotionally detached from others. Like I'll get really sad and people will say, you're emotionally detached. I've done it with girls and I'll pull emotionally away from them. It's like I feel my emotions so much that I can't even talk . . . I'll get withdrawn. I just don't know what to do with it. I'll get really detached when I get emotional.

Crying and sleeping are less harmful options he sometimes chooses to utilize. Turtle feels like he has already cried enough for a lifetime:

For me if I cry for long enough I'm emotionally spent afterwards. I'm just like tired and I'll fall into bed and put the covers over my head and let the next three days go by before I can see anyone again.

In one particularly tough time, Turtle used music and alcohol to an excess to try to escape his feelings.

Music can definitely help. Listening to something sad and knowing other people are suffering too. They wrote this song . . . I'll crawl in bed with some record and drink bourbon. It gives me companionship in my sadness. Somehow everything doesn't feel as intense. I used to wake up in the morning and start to drink. . . Ya, there was a period when I was definitely drinking to cope with the emotional hardships of my life.

The only drug that ever surfaced as a coping method for Turtle was marijuana: I don't think I would have graduated from high school if I hadn't been smoking pot. It allowed me to tolerate a social and economic climate of high school that was too materialistic for me.

In spite of taking on the name of Turtle, he is generally much more physically active than his friends. And he uses this activity to "pump up (his) endorphins." He will exercise in almost any way available to him when trying to keep his emotions in check.

If I'm trying to push through something, I'll hike or run. I notice that I almost enjoy the pain, you know like running in bad weather or you know when my body's hurting. It helps me make it through. Something more actualized than

emotional pain. I'll just push myself so my body hurts 'cause that's probably easier to deal with than being lonely. Or else I really can't detach.

Breathing is fundamental to living, and Turtle finds that focusing on his breathing is a helpful coping technique:

I also breathe or do yoga to cope. I breathe five seconds in and five seconds out. And usually that will bring my heart rate down pretty consistently . . . And that will calm me down if I'm really excited . . . My heart gets really fast when I'm upset, and even more than fast it gets strong. And it helps with that. It just lets you pull back a little bit. Just focus on breathing. It gets through to your mind, your brain, and you can look at things a little bit more clearly.

He will often couple breathing with walks in the woods, which significantly calms his anxiety. Turtle notes the positive effects of being outside on a nice day:

I didn't feel great the other day. And I walked outside. And the moment I stepped outside, it was like nothing could bring me down for the rest of the day. It was just perfect. It was cool. There was wind on your skin. There was a smell in the air. There was not a cloud in the sky. All day I couldn't have been in a better mood.

In addition to beautiful days, he likes peaceful settings, especially graveyards:

Just because it's quiet there. I've found myself walking there before. And it doesn't really make me sad. They're usually kind of pretty. I think people are generally pretty respectful of graveyards. I appreciate that a lot about them.



It seems intuitive that Turtle should crave the company of others, particularly when he so often feels alone. But strangely this was one of the last coping methods discussed in his interview:

My friends are really important to me. They make me laugh. They make me appreciate things about myself. It's easier for me to focus on the things that I could improve upon and the things I'm not happy with. But my friends are kind of like, you're funny and you're weird. They just remind me about the good parts of myself.

The final coping method Turtle reported was one that some people might find unusual. It's a coping method that seems a natural, however, for people who have strong sensual feelings.

This is a picture of a New Zealand jade necklace from my trip there. And whenever I'm kind of stressed out I like to rub it and it reminds me of a time when I travel . . . I definitely like to feel things.

Turtle is a young man, struggling to find ways to make himself happy. Yet most of the time, as a result of both chemical and masochistic tendencies, he seems to make himself uncomfortable. He does not choose to take care of himself in the most basic way as he cuts himself off from the people who care about him. He has a very high intellect that he uses largely to worry about life and the small world right around him.

Because of his intellect, he had found numerous ways to cope with his depression that are known to help in the production of endorphins. He also has some methods that are uniquely his own that seem to bring him the peace and calm he so desperately seeks

## *Michael*

### *Experience*

Michael is a bit of an emotional enigma. Getting him to reveal deep feelings was a difficult task, often times with questions being rephrased in a number of different ways or catching him in a contradictory statement. Yet after much digging there were some real, raw emotions. Perhaps the best example of that is a feeling of hopelessness:

I think there are a couple of elements of not feeling things that go back to childhood. We had some problems in childhood. Our family went through a terrible bankruptcy and we had to relocate. So there was a time that was awful and there was nothing I could do about it. But just a feeling of hopelessness that was really with me for several years after that. Whenever you're financially destroyed that way, there is really nothing that you can do. You have no power to do a lot of things. So in many ways I think that I probably have known that I am ignoring my emotions. It continues to be an issue for me. I don't really even know when it is happening. I know that I feel frustrated by it and I know that I need a release.

Frustration and anger seem to be the most readily available emotions for Michael. He talked of feeling them in relation to the money charged by his colleges. But there were also the feelings that lay at the bottom of a recent "negative emotion" he was asked to relate:

We were with our relatives and it was a kind of situation that demanded a certain degree of gravity and I didn't think my mom was especially displaying that. It didn't match up with the mental and emotional state I was in. So it really frustrated me . . . I didn't feel we could really communicate very well.

It is difficult to say if the emotions he referred to having above, which differed from his mother's, were real or the product of what he intellectually deemed appropriate.

This question arises after a comment Michael made about empathy:

In my acting, I was taught to develop communication skills and to mimic people's messages that they're sending with their body language and things. I think that goes along with empathy because you can read someone through their body language and you can interpret that emotionally. And once you develop that skill you find yourself emotionally trained to respond to others . . . It's an intentional thing on my part so it isn't an automatic thing.

Michael makes a serious intellectual effort to respond to other's emotions. And he gets "bothered" by the emotions on some level, as in the following interaction with his sister:

She was kind of angry with me because she thought I had blown her off when I really had a very good excuse. But she felt like the same thing always happens where we make plans and I never follow through. So in that instance I would have to change my mood and assume a tone of gravity for the rest of the conversation because I don't want her to think I'm not taking her seriously. It really bothered me, both intellectually, trying to analyze who's right and who's wrong, and then just the fact that the problem is there in the first place, regardless of who's right.

In light of these statements, it might appear that Michael's concern for others is largely an intellectual activity. Nevertheless, some feelings poke through. He did talk about his concern for others being real, and the question of whether his empathy was real or part of "emotional training" seemed to be answered in a positive way when he noted,

I think my deep concern for others is what drives me to be empathic towards people. I am concerned about them so I want to be able to form that emotional bridge between us.

Michael also offers two responses to the question of whether or not he experiences worry or anxiety. The first seems to display real worry:

Worrying is something that I'm working on. I am certainly trying not to worry so much. I worry about family, money, my future, my career, and all kinds of stuff I probably shouldn't be worried about. But I think I've picked up the habit along the way to emotionally invest myself in thoughts so that makes it so I probably worry unnecessarily.

In another statement, Michael questions whether his own level of anxiety is manufactured. Michael must have genuine anxiety because otherwise he couldn't intensify it. Yet Michael doesn't trust his strong emotions:

I remember hearing once in college that Salvadore Dali considered a state of heightened anxiety as part of the creative process and it was inspirational for him. That may have stuck in my head at some point so I probably somewhat intentionally increased my level of worry or nervousness . . . I made it a habit to feel it.

Worrying also becomes a problem with trusting his own thoughts. Although Michael is a very intellectual young man, he worries about his own thoughts to a degree that he often does not trust what he wants to say will be acceptable.

When I'm anxious it makes me confused and I start to think of everything I'm going to say so my thinking comes to a screeching halt. Especially when I second-

guess everything. I'll decide or ask myself whether I should say something or whether it's stupid. I just second-guess myself constantly.

Michael asserted that seeing a lonely person didn't stir up any emotions in him. But after prodding, it turned out that his own lonely feelings had been difficult for him. He noted,

Well it's uncomfortable. It's like a big question mark. And I guess I feel nervous and anxious. You have feelings of guilt or like questioning your own self worth. And all the things that go along with that.

A very troubling time in Michael's life occurred when he went across country to attend college. He felt he was expected to go there because it was his father's alma mater:

When I went to college I felt like I was set emotionally adrift. I didn't have my support system around me . . . I got depressed. It was like an elongated feeling of unhappiness. There was an overall sense of a literal bearing down. And it was like a shut off of your excitement for life . . . I emotionally walled off.

Perhaps the deepest emotion wound inflicted on Michael was the death of his father when Michael was 24. Though he talked about a depth of emotional feeling, it seemed that in fact he kept his emotions at arm's length, not allowing them to touch him again:

Grieving can be a process of release or something kind of ugly and traumatic. And in the case of dad's death it was more along those lines because it was unexpected. I had no way to deal with it. No previous experience with it . . . I stayed in school and that was a big mistake . . . Really though I had no idea of the incredible amount of stress when I went into the doctor of chiropractic program.

So I had no idea it was going to be that difficult or that stressful. It was mental stress, which can pour down and become emotional stress. Coupled with the emotional stress over dad, it was just unbearable. So that was one time when I really felt that my heart was broken. I had pains in my chest.

Not all of Michael's feelings are negative or flat. At the time of his second interview, he had just broken up with his girlfriend of five years. He had not been aware that it was a dysfunctional relationship -- in spite of the fact that it had stopped being a physical one -- but he realized in retrospect that it had been. He had even shielded himself from those feelings:

Leaving the relationship, I am flooded with positive emotions. I would much rather just think of it as an unhealthy relationship so I will continue to feel a sense of relief that comes from ending it. I would say that the emotion there was one of lightness.

Michael also finds great joy in creative writing, which he views both as a coping mechanism and an experience of pure joy:

It brings me great joy. That is a sense of relief but it's beyond what you can intellectualize so your thoughts won't get in the way. But it's like serotonin or dopamine or whatever . . . It's very fulfilling. It's like I'm involved in a worthwhile pursuit. And everything that happens feels like magic.

Michael has somatic pains that are literal experiences of figures of speech. He has already spoken of his heart breaking and chest pains. He uses chiropractic terms to explain why these pains occur. He also talks of the "pain in the neck" and the "pain in the rear end" being literal somatic experiences for him.

The emotion that Michael seems to feel most often, however, is one already mentioned: frustration. His confusion about his emotions not matching those of his mother's may have been frustrating because he didn't feel she confirmed his own emotions. Michael often needs confirmation not only of his own emotions, but even of the fact that he genuinely has feelings:

When I am not feeling, I feel some sense of frustration at not being able to do so.

So it's not feeling emotionality that I do not enjoy . . . I guess I'm not aware of how to engage emotionally. Probably my emotions are off more than I've acknowledged. So I feel frustrated, but if there were some way I knew how to turn them on, I would.

### *Coping*

Michael's experience of emotional overexcitability is heavily colored by his primary coping method of dissociation. Frequently he talked of "shutting out" his emotions "not feeling" or "walling off." He wants to "turn them back on" but that seems beyond his ability to achieve. He makes frequent references to this tendency as a defense mechanism. For example, he observes,

I don't know. It's possible that my not feeling something for a lonely person in a group is a defense mechanism against my own inability to feel comfort in the same situation.

Similarly he notes,

I think I answered the question that I didn't take things to heart because it was a defense mechanism as well. Thinking about something like that can cause me discomfort.

Another defense mechanism, acting, seems to have a significant role in controlling emotions for Michael as well. He states,

As someone who has come through acting training, I have the idea that you're supposed to control your emotions, either that or let them burst forth in a premeditated way.

Michael also admits that he didn't have the proper perspective on his relationship with his ex-girlfriend because he never sought advice from anyone outside of the relationship:

I didn't realize that I needed someone outside of the loop to talk to. I think there was some controlling of emotions there. And I wouldn't even call it "controlling my emotions" because it's probably been so massive and I haven't really been able to realize that it was so constant that it really became a condition of life.

Although Michael is now seeing a therapist, and this is a very positive coping method, he only had the therapeutic relationship with his girlfriend during the time after his father's death. He now sees that he was in the relationship for the wrong reasons.

During the relationship I never really had anyone to talk to like a therapist or a psychologist. But I realized that she fulfilled that role for me. She has that sort of mentality. Her mind reminds me of my therapist now. And I realize that I needed her because during that time I needed someone to talk to . . . Physically we weren't really compatible. We were just intellectually I guess.

Even though he used her as a therapist, it was very difficult on the two of them when they were talking about their own relationship. This seemed to wreck havoc with her intellectual side as she was unable to have a true perspective of herself in the



relationship. It forced Michael to be guarded in what he could say. “I was talking to her about our problems but only so far as it wouldn’t make her become an irrational wreck.”

Michael admits that he can’t express himself freely. He not only has to guard his emotions against his ex-girlfriend, he has to guard them from himself.

I’m not able to express my emotions openly. I’m unable to fully channel what seems natural, I guess. It’s like I have to intellectually interpret all my actions which otherwise could just come from my emotions . . . I screen my emotions . . . I’ve developed a constant voice in my head that says, “Okay, maybe okay, or that’s not okay.”

Michael uses his intellect often to cope with emotions that haven’t been shut off:

I’m certainly trying not to worry so much. Because I’m realizing that whenever you want to get from point a to point b, all that time you’re spending on the way, you don’t need to worry about getting there. Just wait until it happens.

It is largely the creative and intellectual parts of his mind that Michael uses to express many of his emotions:

I think that the more time I spend working intensely and mentally and using my emotional or artistic part of my brain, the better. I have to spend more time doing this. I feel it has to balance out in a way or I don’t know how that works. I need that and I do that a lot as a way to get out and work those emotions out . . . I still feel like there’s a lot of emotion that is coming in that I’m blocking or trying to transmute into something else. There’s still something that is not being expressed.

Theater is also a good way for Michael to express emotions. Although it was discussed above, theatrical training in some ways helps control emotions. It also

provides an escape valve by allowing the actor to express a character's emotions on stage:

I've never been that kind of guy who could express anger well. And so maybe that's why theater appealed to me because there's that sort of element of physical expression through voice, which can be empowering. And that's something I'm not currently doing anything with.

Michael reaffirmed both creative acts of writing and theater as positive coping methods:

I would like to express and maybe sort of channel my anger through something like acting where I could channel my sadness or grief through writing.

Although Michael claims he used alcohol and marijuana only for recreation and never as coping mechanisms, his words undermine this assertion:

Whenever I stopped using mainly alcohol, whenever alcohol was not in my life, that was probably the time when I needed a therapist. That was the time when I started seeing my ex-girlfriend.

Most people would not see sleep as a problematic way to cope with emotions. But for Michael, it may have become an unconscious form of escape. However Michael describes sleeping as one his most pleasurable experiences:

I enjoy sleeping, but not the type of sleep people normally engage in. It's an active pursuit of sleep . . . As a student I have breaks between classes and I take naps, and that's always very nice . . . I like naps. They help me melt away tension sometimes . . . I guess they probably do help me to forget things for a while. Because there are lots of things for me to forget right now. Things seem to mount up more and more.

While sleep may seem a good escape valve however, it may be viewed as simply another route for Michael to turn off or avoid his emotions.

Along with creative writing and seeing a therapist, perhaps the most positive coping tool Michael has is a strong network of family and friends. “They are the people who make my life . . . They are the people I can talk to . . . But as a whole they symbolize a support system.”

Michael is an intelligent and creative young man who has a hard time feeling and expressing his emotions. However, those emotions that he has allowed himself to feel are very real and deep. He is working hard to turn all his emotions back on and seems to have the positive coping skills to handle whatever he may start to feel.

#### *Composite Structural Textural Description of the Participants*

The world can be an overwhelming place for a gifted young man experiencing emotional overexcitability. Negative emotions become too much and thoughts turn into a litany of attacks on the person. There seems to be no respite from this emotional overload:

I was sad all day yesterday. I woke up feeling really tired. I just felt like I wasn’t going to get through the next two months of my life. I felt overwhelmed, even though everything I have is pretty modest.

Sometimes overwhelming feelings can be positive. Again, a flood of emotions runs through the young man’s mind, to the point where he can’t hold it all:

Friendship has made me cry more than most things. Like experiencing a really deep moment with someone has brought tears. I feel too much happiness and too

much closeness and just too much . . . You know you want it to be a little bit less because you can't take it all in at once and process it.

For most young men however, the negative aspect of overwhelming emotions seems more prevalent than the positive. Often this negative impact results from feeling a loss of control. For these young men, letting emotions occur as a smooth, natural process is not the reality. Rather, they feel bombarded with emotions that are too strong to push away.

When I see someone sad and lonely, even in a picture, I experience sadness myself. And there's almost something I'm trying to overcome just because I'll be really happy and I'll see someone really sad and that immediately brings me down. It's hard for me to stay independent of that . . . I feel like I've lost myself into someone else. Just lost a degree of my ability.

Loneliness is a frequent companion for the emotionally overexcitable young man. Even when in the presence of other people, loneliness can creep in. This is partly the result of feeling different from others around him. But even when friends of his choosing surround him, there can be a sense of being cut off. Often this is a physical feeling.

"Loneliness feels like a weight. It makes me feel like I don't want to do anything. It kind of takes my breath away." But the experience can also involve a sense of losing oneself:

Well it's uncomfortable. It's like a big question mark. And I guess it makes me feel anxious and nervous. You have feelings of guilt or like questioning your own self worth, and all the things that go along with that.

Anger and frustration often accompany loneliness. When the situation is out of the young man's control, often there is nothing to feel but frustration and anger. But few young men feel that it is socially acceptable to express these emotions.

When I would get ridiculed, I remember wanting to cry, but I didn't because there were people there. I remember wanting to scream, but I didn't because there were people there. I remember wanting to fight, but I didn't because I would get suspended and my parents would be upset. I remember wanting to transfer schools, but my dad said no because I needed to learn to deal with it. I remember wanting to quit everything that made me happy, because they were unacceptable. I just wanted to be normal.

Depression is also a frequent visitor to the gifted emotionally overexcited young man:

Depression for me was not wanting to eat, not wanting to talk to friends. And when your friends would call and ask what was wrong, not wanting to talk to them and bottling it up on the inside. Just letting it accumulate, accumulate, accumulate and not doing what you usually do. . . I just didn't feel like doing anything.

On the heels of depression may come suicide or suicidal thoughts. Not all gifted young men experience this extreme form of depression, but enough do to make it a significant concern. For some, depression brings on the constant torment of repetitive negative thoughts:

There are days when I'm telling myself, I should just kill myself. I'll wake up in the morning and that will seem easier. I'm so tired. It's like waking up in the

morning and keep feeling these emotions and keep doing the same things over and over again . . . Like why keep going through the same thing?

For others, the intensity of feeling is enough to want to make thoughts of ending their lives a constant preoccupation:

I was really lonely. I had friends and we could go out, but there wasn't any satisfaction. It seemed like the same thing all the time. I hurt inside really bad . . . I have never felt so much mental pain. My mind was going crazy, and I realized what it was but I couldn't do anything about it. For a month I thought about suicide every day.

Some of the negative thoughts that bring about depression arise from the self-berating behavior of these young men. They are constantly examining themselves and finding themselves lacking:

I generally don't feel really bad towards other people if there is a problem with me and someone. Like when we're in a fight. I'll brood about what they're doing or what is happening with them, but I usually don't get upset with someone. I'll get upset with myself.

Worry is another constant with those who berate themselves. It is just another way of torturing themselves with doubt, and usually it is self-doubt.

I definitely worry . . . I really worry about myself not meeting the expectations and goals that I set for myself . . . I'm constantly dealing with myself. I'm self-involved. Like I have a problem sleeping unless I have a T.V. on or something. Otherwise I just lay there and think. I worry about tomorrow and I worry about yesterday.

Taking everything said to heart often causes self-doubt. Some young men feel that if you choose to interject emotions into your thoughts, self-doubt is a natural consequence. Even if it is chosen, it still causes pain. And more often than not, it is a condition over which one has no control.

I take everything to heart. If you say something about me, I'm going to take it personally. I can't control it. I can say, oh that doesn't bother me. And I can say, I'll just let that roll off my shoulder. But I can't stop thinking about it. And it's weird because I cannot not think about it. It's frustrating because it's like, why is this bothering me?

Worry and anxiety seem to be synonymous. For some anxiety becomes so intense that their thought patterns are interrupted:

When I'm anxious, it makes me confused and I start to think of everything I'm going to say so my thinking comes to a screeching halt. Especially when I second-guess everything. I'll decide or ask myself whether I should say something or whether it's stupid. I just second-guess myself constantly.

Worry can also spiral out of control. One bad thought seems to feed the next and they escalate until they reach a climax:

When a dance show comes and everyone is calling my name, and I think, am I going to mess up? And if I mess up what are people going to think? I can't believe I'm going to mess up because if I believe it, I'll do it. Then people aren't going to be excited anymore. They're not going to cheer for me. They're not going to be happy. They're going to take everything away from me. I'm not going to be happy. I'm going to be a failure.

This kind of worry seems masochistic in its self-defeating spiral. But true masochism is also seen in some gifted young men who use it as a way out of mental pain:

When I'm down, it's for a week or two of really being in the gutter. I'll focus on it 'cause I'll want to suffer. I want the pain of focusing on that . . . Generally at times when I've failed myself I just want to be present in that . . . Even if someone really close to me fails me in a pretty significant way, it's a lot easier to deal with than when I fail myself.

Self-isolation can also be viewed as masochistic. Yet for the primarily intellectual gifted young man, his very intellect can be used as a form of isolation:

I don't want to ignore people. And I feel like sometimes I get really aloof. And sometimes I feel like it is all or nothing. I don't want to chitchat. I don't want to have a casual conversation. I don't want to go with the flow. Something more profound is going on inside my head and if I can't sit down and really like express these big thoughts, then I don't even want to talk. I'd rather be by myself and thinking what I want to think about than chitchat about things I'm not really concerned with just for the sake of having social engagement

Perfectionism can be both good and bad. It often yields a stunning product, but more often than not, it causes the individual to become bogged down trying to reach the unattainable.

Take a little project for school that I probably don't even have to do, but that will be like where my passion is. It's huge . . . it like grows and grows inside of me like this enormous thing and I have to prove myself to the universe. It feels like it's tied and connected to everything. Like I've been writing this one poem for



three months now. It's not very good and it's not very long, but it is hugely important to me and I can't let it go. I refuse to turn it in until it is perfect. It has to have all those connections to myself personally, to the history of the world, to spirituality.

Not all emotions of the gifted emotionally overexcited young man are negative. Some are supremely positive. Generally positive emotions occur when one is engaged in an activity which calls upon one's greatest gifts:

Writing brings me great joy. There is a sense of relief but it is beyond what you can intellectualize so your thoughts won't get in the way. But it's like serotonin or dopamine, or whatever . . . It's very fulfilling. It's like I'm involved in a worthwhile pursuit. And everything that happens feels like magic.

For some, spiritual experiences can bring about feelings of great joy.

I would say that when I'm in church and the spirit moves when God is present, I think I feel joy. Everything seems like I've got lots of worries on my mind, lots of things going around in my head, and all of them cease to exist. That's extreme joy for me . . . I'm peaceful but I'm happy.

In some cases there is a sense of power.

Dancing gives me happiness and power. The feeling you get when you feel really healthy. It just makes me feel good on the inside. And just happiness . . . My most joyous moments have been when I'm on stage with everyone in the crowd looking at me. Me being center . . . And I have bodily feelings. Adrenaline. Like I feel this rush.

Somatic expressions are commonplace for the gifted young man. He can experience them whether he is feeling positive or negative emotions. Although each gifted young man may not relate to all the somatic responses discussed here, many can relate to at least one.

I feel light, almost anti-gravity. So there is this cooling emotion from my toes up through my head. You know how sometimes you can feel like you're smiling inside, like your muscles are smiling.

Other positive emotional responses given capture the intensity of joy. "I wanted to cry but they were tears of happiness. But my heart was in my throat. And when I have these feelings I can't speak."

Intensely somatic expressions may also accompany more negative emotions:

I feel tension in my fists. I'll clench up my fists and start pumping my jawbone.

I'll start curling my fingers and pumping my forearms . . . Sometimes my stomach will ache. I will almost feel hungry and then I'll eat and then my stomach will just be upset.

Some are struck in multiple areas of the body:

I remember sweat on the brow and the back of the neck. I felt sinking in my stomach and shaking in my hands . . . I carry stress in the midsection. It's almost like clenching where I bring my knees up. Also a lot of times there is like a pouring of emotions out of the crown of my head. I'll feel it in my forehead too. I'll try to release it. I feel like I need to open up the top of my head and pour it out.

Whether the emotions express themselves physically or mentally, for the gifted,

emotionally overexcited young man, emotions are almost always intense. Some can be positive. Unfortunately, it is the extremely negative ones that most often have the greatest impact and leave the most indelible mark.

## CHAPTER 6

### DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

#### *Discussion*

Only a limited portion of our population is considered gifted and being gifted is an experience that many educators, parents and counselors want to understand better. Numerous studies have determined the gifted have heightened sensitivity (Dabrowski, 1967; Lewis & Kitano, 1992; Roedell, 1984; Silverman, 1983; Tolan, 1994) and still more that attest to the fact that this sensitivity causes emotional or social difficulties. This is due to the fact that emotionally the gifted are different from the norm (Gross & Feldhusen, 1990; Roberts & Lovell, 1994; Roedell, 1984; Silverman, 1993). This heightened sensitivity in terms of the emotional life of the gifted has been explained as *emotional overexcitability* (Dabrowski, 1967; Piechowski, 2006). In his recent book, Piechowski (2006) identifies some of the affective expressions of emotional overexcitability as inhibition, enthusiasm, ecstasy, pride, strong affective memory, shame, feelings of unreality, fears and anxieties, feelings of guilt, concern with death, and depressive and suicidal moods. Although there are some very positive emotions in the list, the negative ones seem to far outweigh the positive.

Gifted males experience a greater number and greater intensity of negative emotions because of their heightened sensitivity. Although gifted males and females are at the same level in their potential for emotional overexcitability (Lewis & Kitano, 1992) emotional expressiveness is more problematic for males. It is largely felt to be a feminine trait and in our society, which devalues feminine traits and tends to be homophobic, that is seen as a bad thing. So although both sexes have to try to suppress their emotional

intensity in order to fit in (Lewis & Kitano, 1992), males may need to suffer harsher consequences if they don't suppress their emotionality (Tolan, 1994).

This suppression hits its peak in late adolescence when identity is still being determined. Most of the participants in this study were still trying to figure out who they were and what their career aspirations should be. Their emotional overexcitability seemed to make these processes even more difficult as they were bombarded with largely negative emotions and guilt. Each seemed to be enveloped in his own world and all five participants experienced loneliness.

In her study of people who experienced loneliness, Rokack (1989) observed:

Loneliness is always associated with much pain and suffering. It is impossible to talk to the lonely and hear their stories without noticing the confusion, hurt and pain they go through. The major element of agony addresses the inner turmoil and emotional upheaval, the vulnerability, aching and anger that the lonely experience (p 9).

The participants in this study seemed to describe a loneliness that relates closely to the above description. Turtle described his loneliness through somatic expressions of being weighted down and waking up lonely. Jim spoke of being lonely when he has isolated himself from people he loves. Edward felt isolated at a very early age when his friends ostracized him. Dan's loneliness came when he was surrounded by friends who drank and played video games and he failed to feel any satisfaction in these relationships. Michael finally talked about lonely feelings after recognizing them and admitting to himself that he had been blocking them off. He also began questioning his own self-worth.

These young men feel isolated because those around them usually don't feel things as intensely (Lewis & Kitano, 1992). Like most males under normal circumstances, my participants felt like they had no one to whom they could turn (Lewis & Kitano, 1992) which intensified the loneliness. This was consistent with a study by Azmitra, Ittel & Radmacher (2005) in which only 30 percent of males saw emotional support as an important aspect of friendship. That would seem to be a low number for the participants in this study as four out of five of them felt that connecting to others was an important strategy for coping with their loneliness. There was a loneliness that "comes from self-rejection and self-alienation from society and seems to be related to depression" (Clamar, 1985).

Four of the participants in this study acknowledged that they were depressed. It seems very possible that the fifth participant, who spoke of being lonely, may have been hiding his depression from himself. He had talked about being embarrassed that he had breakdowns as a child and said he was very detached from his emotions for a very long time.

The primary coping strategy used by the participants to respond to their depression was detachment. All five participants used detachment from themselves and from others in order to deal with the depression. Michael and Jim spoke about an unconscious detachment that relates more to dissociation from their own emotions and that seems to have been something over which they had no control (H.W. Martin Jr., personal communication, February 21, 2008). Rokack (1989) described self-alienation as a feeling of having an inner void, a detachment from the self and an alienation from one's own identity. The participants in this study all talked about walling off their emotions so

that they could function. Such a detachment is a primary coping strategy for those with depression. Similar to compartmentalizing, the individual is able to sort feelings into separate parts of the self so they don't have to be dealt with in the present (Jackson & Peterson, 2003). Another strategy to avoid dealing with difficult emotions in the present is the escapist approach of sleeping. Both Turtle and Michael found this an appealing option. Sleeping is likely another form of detachment that participants used to cope with overwhelmingly negative feelings.

Depression in males is covert (Gurian, 1999). Males often try to mask depressive symptoms from themselves and others in any way that they can. In addition to using detachment, gifted males also tend to hyper-intellectualize (Jackson & Peterson, 2003; Wilcove, 1998; Winnicott, 1965). This strategy was particularly pronounced for Jim and Michael, as both were more intellectual than overtly emotional in their interviews. Jim even acknowledged his concern that intellectualizing distanced him from other people. But when one is depressed, distancing yourself from others is exactly what the person wants to do. Turtle spoke of this in a very specific way, noting his belief that talking about depression could cause those listening to him harm. Jackson (1995) identified this same feeling arising in some of her highly gifted teens who were experiencing an intense depressive state.

It should be noted that all five participants were asked to review their own structural textural description as well as the composite description. All five agreed that both descriptions felt like true depictions of who they were. So even when only a few participants spoke of a particular topic, all five seemed to relate to that topic as it was described in the composite description.

Another aspect of depression that Dan, Edward and Turtle spoke passionately about was their tendency to berate themselves. They were constantly examining themselves and finding themselves lacking in some way. Most of these self doubts were either real or perceived personal shortcomings that made them feel like they did not belong or that they were not worthy of other's attention. Both Clamar (1985) and Rokack (1989) identified this lack of self-worth as characteristic of loneliness and depression. They also spoke of individuals in these states feeling that they had lost control of their lives. All five of the participants described feeling overwhelmed and out of control. Feeling overwhelmed as a result of one's emotional sensitivity can cause a "psychic overload and may precipitate a depressive state" (Roedell, 1984).

Several things overwhelmed Turtle but a chief complaint was his lack of control when it came to being influenced by the feelings of others. If he was happy, seeing a sad person would make him sad also. For Jim, it was also his emotions that made him feel out of control as he felt that he didn't know how to process all of them. Edward felt he had no control over being ostracized by his friends. Dan felt everything was too much when he was a year behind in college compared to his peers and he couldn't figure out what to do with his life. Michael felt overwhelmed and out of control when his family suffered a bankruptcy. In addition to depression, being overwhelmed and out of control are also known to cause affective numbing (Fletcher, 1996). This is a condition where one is unable to feel emotions.

Four of my participants spoke of feeling frustration, anger or a combination of the two. These were not feelings that had to be covert as both are socially deemed as appropriate for males to feel (Pollack, 1998). Frustration and anger may be used to mask



other feelings, but in the case of my participants the feelings were exactly what they seemed to be. They felt frustration at being out of control or unable to feel emotions, and angry about injustices. Frustration, in fact, often leads to anger. Piechowski (2006) found righteous anger to be a fairly typical feeling among his gifted teen participants. Jim and Michael both had feeling about unjust situations in their lives.

Several of my participants felt that they had to depress their anger, as they thought it would be socially inappropriate to express it and they were afraid of physically hurting someone. Yet being afraid to express anger is likely to lead to greater and greater frustration.

Four of my participants had somatic expressions as a result of being depressed. For Turtle it came out through tension in his fists and stomachaches. Jim felt tension in his forehead, back of his neck and his stomach. Dan experienced tension in his jaw whenever he tried to hold things in. For Michael, there are the literal feelings of a heart breaking, heartache, pains in the neck and pains in the rear end.

It is common to have somatic complaints in relation to depression. In children and adolescents with the disorder, up to 70 percent experienced physical symptoms like abdominal pain, headache, limb pain and malaise (McCawley, Carlsson & Calderon, 1991). However, these symptoms seem to decrease with age (Carlson & Kashani, 1998). It is interesting that all of my participants still seemed to suffer from somatic symptoms at their more advanced age.

Three participants specifically talked about worry and anxiety. Turtle talked of many different worries, but the most upsetting seemed to be related to worrying about himself not being able to reach his goals. He couldn't sleep because of his worries.

Michael found his anxiety over appearing foolish was able to disrupt his thinking and cause him to second guess everything he said. Edward's worries about his performance in dancing escalated out of control, with one negative thought leading to another and another until he would feel a failure.

Worry and anxiety can be insidious threats to the gifted. In response to both, the gifted tend to close off important parts of their awareness, creating blind spots (Clamar, 1985). These blind spots are further symptoms of detachment or dissociation. Although only three participants talked specifically about worry and anxiety, all conceded to its existence by ratifying the composite description.

Perfectionism was a characteristic conceded to by all, but Jim was the only one who mentioned it in an interview. He was writing a short poem that he had been working on for three months. He felt it had to relate to himself, the history of the world and to spirituality. He wouldn't let it go until it was perfect. Perfectionism is generally understood to be an important aspect of gifted behavior (Davis & Rimm, 1998; Jackson & Peterson, 2003; Piechowski, 2006). Indications of perfectionism emerged in each of the participant's interviews.

There is currently no literature on masochism in gifted males, and only Turtle talked about masochistic tendencies. But all agreed, through accepting the composite description, that it was an issue for them. With all the self-berating, anger and frustration, it seems logical that masochism would develop.

Coping behaviors of the emotionally overexcited gifted late adolescent male were not written up in a composite description, as many of the strategies were unique to the individual participants. However, there were some strategies that seemed to be similar for

many of the participants. One method, detachment, has already been discussed as it was pertinent to the finding of depression in the participants' experience. Hyper-intellectualizing was also discussed, as it was evident throughout the interview with both Jim and Michael. In addition, one other participant used his intellect as a method for coping. Edward fought his way out of a depressed state when his parents were disappointed in him by presenting a PowerPoint to them showing why he should be trusted. Intellectualizing can thus serve as a mechanism for hiding depression, even from oneself (Jackson & Peterson, 2003; Wilcove, 1998; Winnicott, 1965) or as a problem-focused method of coping with an issue, as in Edward's case.

Male and females often differ in their choice of coping strategies. Females tend to use more accommodative coping (or emotion-focused) and males more assimilative (or problem-focused) strategies (Compass, 1987; Frydenberg & Lewis, 1991; Olah, 1995). Mental health professionals generally believe that emotion-focused coping is less effective as it treats symptoms rather than causes (Hauser & Bowlds, 1990). Typical strategies of emotion-focused coping include detaching, seeking social support, self-blame, tension reduction, and keeping to oneself (Frydenberg, 1997). These styles seem to fit my participants well. Yet why might my male participants be more prone to using emotion-focused strategies? It could be because when a problem seems unchangeable, individuals often turn to emotion-focused strategies (Frydenberg, 1997). My participants were dealing with feelings of depression, being overwhelmed, lack of control, loneliness, frustration and anger. Perhaps all these seemed unchangeable. It is also generally conceded that girls are twice as likely as boys to experience depression, and this may be attributed to their ruminative style of coping (Frydenberg & Lewis, 1993). My

participants all suffered from various degrees of depression; it was possible that they shared this disorder because of their coping styles.

Older adolescents may turn to tension reducing strategies such as taking drugs, drinking or self-blame (Clamar, 1985; Frydenberg & Lewis, 1993; Gurian, 1998; Page & Cole, 1991; Peterson, Sarigiani & Kennedy, 1991; Rokack, 1984; Tolan, 1994). This was seen in Dan, Turtle, Jim and Michael who used barbiturates, marijuana or alcohol. They all also suffered from self-blame.

Perhaps the reason that my participants resorted to more feminine coping styles relates to the fact that gifted boys are more androgynous than the non-identified (Wilcove, 1998). Bem et al (1978) argued that androgyny was optimal for emotional well being. However, others have found that for a male, androgyny does not correlate to emotional well being (Block, 1984; Chodorow, 1989; Horney, 1967; Wilcove, 1998). This is largely because of the societal prejudice against being gay and the stereotype of gay men as more emotionally expressive than heterosexual men. Turtle, Dan and Edward were all thought to be gay by friends or relatives. Michael may in fact be bisexual. But all five have the emotional overexcitability that would label them as gay because of their sensitivity. In sum, it is likely that their emotional overexcitability and feminine coping styles made my participants more androgynous than their non-identified peers. People's reactions to them, based on preconceived notions of masculinity and heterosexuality, are also part of their experience of emotional overexcitability.

The most adaptive emotion-focused coping style is seeking help from others (Hauser & Bowlds, 1990). While most of my participants distanced themselves from their friends and family when they were experiencing depression and loneliness, four went to

see a therapist. I presume the fifth would have gone also if money had not been an obstacle. This is unusual, as males are more resistant than females in seeking aid from others (Hauser & Bowlds, 1990; Roscoe & Skomski, 1989). Seeking aid from a therapist is key, however, to emotional health. So in spite of all the negative coping evident in my participants, they all have some emotionally healthy coping responses.

There are two participants who gave me cause for concern about their mental health. Dan contemplated suicide a year before the interview for a period of three months. Turtle tried committing suicide at least twice in his teen years, once by slitting his wrists and once by setting himself on fire. He was hospitalized for several weeks after this attempt. Several studies have speculated that trying to hide depressive disorders makes males more vulnerable to completing a suicide (Cross, 1996; Jackson & Peterson, 2003) even though females attempt suicide more frequently. This, again, may be moderated by males being more androgynous. As Frydenberg (1997) said, “Big boys don’t cry: they just kill themselves” (p.146). Oddly enough, to contradict Frydenberg’s saying that big boys don’t cry, both Dan and Turtle readily admitted that crying was one of their coping styles.

Abramson et al (1998) suggested that cognitive vulnerability and dysfunctional attitudes bring about low self-esteem and hopelessness, which in turn can lead to suicide. Both Dan and Turtle have trouble with berating themselves and so show signs of low self-esteem. Both, however, are quite accomplished and well liked so their thinking is clearly dysfunctional.

In a more positive vein, all five participants talked about communing with nature and/or God as coping strategies. Gurian (1999) described how nature and spirituality may

serve the same emotional need for peaceful, meditative moments in a young man. All the participants sought solace in nature and found joy. This was very positive. It also gives credence to Piechowski's (2006) belief that theorists and researchers may need to consider adding spiritual overexcitability to the other five expressions. My five participants seemed to reach a higher and happier plane of being when they engaged in spirituality.

Perhaps one of the most pervasive notions about males and their emotional outlets is that men pursue sports or physical activity to relieve their stress. This was true in my study for Turtle, Dan and Edward as they were involved in exercising, soccer, and dance. In addition to sports, arts and music provided outlets for four of my participants. Dan played the guitar, Edward danced and played the violin, Michael wrote screenplays and acted in theater, and Jim wrote poetry and self-reflective journals. It is very likely that all are creative as emotional overexcitability is high in creative people. All four spoke of their creative endeavors as providing very positive outlets. Both sports and arts can be seen as positive, active coping methods. Elkind (1984) believed adopting positive coping methods led to high self-esteem.

Because late adolescence is the time when many young people are still finding a vocation, it is not surprising that only Edward and Michael had found their niche. Dan and Turtle reported feeling overwhelmed when thinking about the next step to take after college. Their solution was to avoid thinking about it. Jim seemed to have a healthier attitude, as he felt that he had time to experiment with different options. These three were all in a state of moratorium, whereas Edward and Michael had reached achievement (Marcia, 1966). Jim's moratorium, however, could lead to achievement in one area, with

a return to moratorium if he subsequently contemplated a different direction for achievement. This cycle can repeat itself endlessly if necessary. It is known, in Marcia's terms, as the MAMA cycle (Marcia, 1966). It is, perhaps, the healthiest alternative to reaching as final decision about a career, particularly for gifted males who experience multi-potentiality.

According to Kerr (1986) "multi-potentiality, defined as the ability to succeed in any one of a number of occupations, is considered to be the cause of most difficulties gifted youth encounter in making career decisions" (p130). Perfectionism also enters into this problem, as the gifted youth believe they must work perfectly in the perfect job and they fail to see other options (Emmett & Minor, 1993). Because the emotionally overexcited males worry and self-berate as part of their intensity, job indecision becomes a more distinct problem.

In addition to my findings on the experience of being a gifted, late adolescent male with emotional overexcitability, other related findings emerged as a result of my study

First, I discovered that the Overexcitabilities Questionnaire II (OEQII) is not predictive of emotional overexcitability in males. We may need to use the OEQII as an oral prompt rather than a written instrument, at least for males. Of all my participants, only Edward scored in the highest percentile of prediction for emotional overexcitability after taking a written test. This did not seem realistic to me as I had instructed my children (who referred the participants to me) in all the ways emotional overexcitability could express itself. They assured me that given the criteria I listed, all participants were excellent candidates.

Michael, who was known to me through my son, was not nominated by my son. He felt that Michael was not emotional. I pursued him as a participant, however, because I had seen very convincing signs of emotion in his theatrical presentations. So it seemed unlikely that he and the other three participants had not scored in the highest percentile. To test this, I included the emotional questions from the OEQII as part of my first interview. The OEQII had been taken in written form prior to this interview and I had scored it for each participant. Just prior to the first interview I showed my participants a list of the signs of emotional overexcitability to let them know what they felt was not unusual or “wrong” for males to feel. Then I asked them orally the same questions they had been asked in the written questionnaire. Their answers were far different after seeing what “typical” experiences of emotional overexcitability were.

Once I rescored the emotional overexcitability portion of the OEQII, all my participants qualified as high in emotional overexcitability. All, that is, except Michael. He said most of the questions sounded too gay and he wasn’t going to say that they were like him. Michael was also the participant who had a four-year relationship with a girl in which there hadn’t been a physical relationship for a long time. Of a new girl he anticipated dating after he left his old girlfriend, he said he didn’t plan to have a sexual relationship with her.

Add to this my son’s confession that Michael had once “come on” to him, and he thought that Michael was bisexual. I think, perhaps, Michael protested too much about questions sounding gay. I believe he is either bisexual or gay. Clearly Michael has either not accepted this identity or he feels that it had to be hidden. Both possibilities set him at high risk for depression and self-loathing. This high risk could be the main reason for



Michael's dissociation. Michael scored in the lowest percentile in every overexcitability except for the intellectual. The norm in overexcitability is that if you are high in intellectual, you are also high in emotional and potentially in others as well. But Michael found "gay"-sounding questions for all of the overexcitabilities except for intellectual. All the other participants, while being under the highest percentile before the interview, had scored in the highest percentile on emotional and at least two other overexcitabilities after their interview responses were taken into account.

Another interesting finding, relative to the OEQII, is that every young man found his most positive coping style in one of his highest scoring areas of overexcitability. For instance, Edward scored highest in psychomotor and dancing was his favorite coping method. Michael and Jim both scored highest in intellectual and both found writing brought them the greatest joy. Dan was highest in emotional overexcitability and for him, connection to others was his most profitable coping style. Although Turtle scored the highest numbers in emotional and intellectual overexcitabilities, he also scored in the highest percentile for psychomotor. For Turtle, exercising seemed to be his favorite and most successful method of coping.

Several participants mentioned during their interview that they were closer to their mother than to their father. From that point on, I asked each participant about his closeness to his parents, and all said they were closest to their mother "by far." This goes against the most common supposition that father-son and mother-daughter are the closest dyads (Albert, 1994; Russell & Saebel, 1997). Alvino (1991) found that gifted boys were closer to their mothers. Kerr & Cohn (2001) postulated that the father may be threatened by the feminine qualities of intuition, verbal giftedness and creativity that come out of the

intense contact between the mother and son. Two of my participants had parents who were divorced and one had parents who were estranged. Although two studies have suggested that the mother-son relationship is negatively affected by parental discord (Osborne & Fincham; Russell & Saebel, 1997) this was not the case for Turtle, Jim or Dan.

The question is, which came first? Did the close contact with the mother cause the emotional overexcitability, or did the emotional overexcitability cause the young man to become closer to his mother? When I asked my participants they all responded that the emotional overexcitability had always been there, but that their mothers nurtured it in them. This is consistent with Dabrowski's belief that overexcitabilities are a natural part of the gifted mind.

The fact that most of my male participants did not have close father-son relationships is noteworthy. All of them tried to please their fathers, but with varying degrees of success. Only Edward talked of being particularly close with his father, and this was the result of his father saying that he was proud of Edward. The onus appears to be on the fathers when relationships are not close, as all the participants seemed to want a closer relationship.

Another methodological finding was that the camera in photo-elicitation was not necessarily effective for all participants in helping to express their emotions. This contradicts Hollingsworth's (1942) finding that gifted children have an ease with the use of metaphors and symbols. When I gave each participant the photo prompt, I gave him or her the metaphor as an example of what they might use in framing their own pictures. I suggested a picture of a gate could convey that they felt shut out of the crowd. But only

Edward and Jim took metaphoric shots that helped them explain emotions that had not been revealed in prior interviews. All the others took very literal photos, such as "Here is a picture of my dog. He makes me happy." It is also interesting to note that Edward and Jim were the only ones to use their own cameras. Perhaps their comfort level in taking pictures was higher and this freed their minds for more creative photographs.

### *Implications*

Teachers, parents and counselors have many needs to attend to for gifted, late adolescent males high in emotional overexcitability. These young men are often depressed, lonely, angry and frustrated. To escape these feelings they frequently detach from themselves and others, engage in substance abuse and contemplate suicide. They need help.

Gifted males high in emotional overexcitability may want to consider seeing a counselor or therapist. If seeing a private therapist is too costly, there are community health centers that often provide these services at little or no cost. Therapists may help gifted males identify signs of detaching (i.e.: intellectualizing, compartmentalizing). This may help them avoid using these less effective coping methods and learn to feel their emotions, and consequently experience the growth that comes from embracing their feelings. A therapist can also help late adolescent males to overcome unrealistic and perfectionistic thinking. This will free the gifted male from some overwhelming pressure he may feel and decrease the tendency for depression.

Teachers of gifted children should present Dabrowski's Theory of Positive Disintegration in its entirety. They could show how emotional overexcitability is actually a good thing in the process of moral development and self-actualization. I did this with all

my participants after the last interview and they responded very favorably. They were visibly reassured about having emotional overexcitabilities. Many of my participants were in the middle of an identity crisis. This Dabrowski discussion allowed them to embrace their emotional overexcitability as part of their identity. Similarly, school counselors should discuss the idea of multi-potentiality in career decisions. They can then explain that a career decision does not have to be made for a lifetime.

It should be noted here that creativity is frequently very high in gifted people. Michael, Edward and Jim all seemed very high in creativity as was seen through their creative writing, dancing and poetry, respectively. Creativity can often account for feelings of depression, loneliness and other neurotic behaviors (Feist, 1999, Freud, 1908, Jung, 1923). Research on this issue should be shared with creative people so they can see that their neuroses often go hand in hand with their creativity. Like Dabrowski's theory, knowing there is a reason for negative feelings can often ameliorate them.

Teachers, parents or school counselors should go over all of the gifted male's overexcitabilities scores and isolate those in the highest percentile. They could then discuss coping methods that may be appropriate for the overexcitabilities that have been separated out. They could also suggest, with help from the young man, which activities might correspond to the particular overexcitabilities chosen (i.e.: dancing for psychomotor, cooking for sensual, writing for intellectual, creative writing for imaginal, and connecting to others for emotional). It is my hope that when appropriate coping strategies are used, there will be less need for self-medicating behavior, as helping these young men focus on active coping methods might also raise their self-esteem.

Teachers, parents or school counselors could help them find, or start, community outreach centers to support those causes that bring them to feel righteous anger. Several studies (Hébert, 1996; Hébert, 1998b; Hébert 2000a; Jones et al, 1993) have indicated that community involvement is an excellent outlet for gifted males. There are also several books that address this topic (Kuykendall, 1992; Lewis, 1991).

Because they have such close relationships with their mothers, gifted males high in emotional overexcitability often threaten their fathers, causing a rift in their relationship. Hébert and Olenchak (2000) found that adult mentors can provide social and emotional support. In cases where the young man does not have a strong relationship with his father, teachers and parents may try to find an adult male mentor to support the young man's development and his need for male modeling.

Supporting Piechowski's (2006) findings, all my participants had an appreciation for their feelings. They started to embrace their negative feelings more after learning about Dabrowski's Theory of Positive Disintegration. If they continue to embrace their feelings, avoid detachment, and turn to more active and problem-focused coping methods, their experience with the negative expression of emotional overexcitability will become less threatening.

The OEQII has repeatedly been shown not to work when measuring emotional overexcitabilities in males. However, it is currently the only easily scored instrument we have to measure the overexcitabilities. If a teacher, parent or school counselor administering the instrument shows males the common expressions of emotional overexcitability before they take the measure, this could free them from preconceived notions of how they "should" answer. Alternately, school counselors could lead a

discussion group with gifted males in which they are free to express their emotional overexcitabilities to one another. Either of these methods would make it “safer” to answer the questions honestly.

In closing, I quote Piechowski (2006):

Our well being is at stake if any one of our vital emotional connections -- to others, to our self, to the world, and to the spiritual universe -- is weakened. Each connection depends on the flow of energy animating it. The more intense the flow, the more alive we become (p.245).

By helping our emotionally overexcited young men, it is my hope that the negative experiences can become less threatening and used for positive development.

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APPENDIX A  
OEQII

## OEQ II Inventory

**Directions:** Please rate how much each statement fits you. Respond on the basis of what you are like now, not how you would like to be or how you think you should be. Circle the number under the statement that

	Not at all like me	Not Much like me	Some -what like me	A lot like me	Very Much like me
1. I like to daydream.....	1	2	3	4	5
2. I am a competitive person.....	1	2	3	4	5
3. The varieties of sound and color are delightful.....	1	2	3	4	5
4. My pretend world is very real to me.....	1	2	3	4	5
5. I am an independent thinker .....	1	2	3	4	5
6. I feel other people's feelings.....	1	2	3	4	5
7. If an activity is physically exhausting, I find it satisfying.....	1	2	3	4	5
8. Viewing art is a totally absorbing experience.....	1	2	3	4	5
9. I worry a lot .....	1	2	3	4	5
10. I love to be in motion .....	1	2	3	4	5
11. It makes me sad to see a lonely person in a group.....	1	2	3	4	5
12. I can take difficult concepts and translate them into something more understandable.....	1	2	3	4	5
13. I get great joy from the artwork of others .....	1	2	3	4	5
14. When I get bored, I begin to daydream .....	1	2	3	4	5
15. When I have a lot of energy, I want to do something really physical.....	1	2	3	4	5
16. I question everything – how things work, what things mean, why things are the way they are.....	1	2	3	4	5
17. I can be so happy that I want to laugh and cry at the same time.....	1	2	3	4	5
18. I am more energetic than most people my age.....	1	2	3	4	5
19. I can form a new concept by putting together a number of different things.....	1	2	3	4	5
20. Sometimes I pretend I am someone else.....	1	2	3	4	5
21. The longer that I sit still, the more restless I get.....	1	2	3	4	5
22. Things that I picture in my mind are so vivid that they seem real to me.....	1	2	3	4	5
23. I observe and analyze everything .....	1	2	3	4	5
24. I find myself mixing truth and fantasy in my thoughts.....	1	2	3	4	5
25. Theories get my mind going.....	1	2	3	4	5
26. I have strong feelings of joy, anger, excitement, and despair.	1	2	3	4	5
27. I feel music throughout my whole body.....	1	2	3	4	5
28. I enjoy exaggerating reality.....	1	2	3	4	5
29. I feel like my body is constantly in motion.....	1	2	3	4	5

	<b>Not at all like me</b>	<b>Not much like me</b>	<b>Some -what like me</b>	<b>A lot like me</b>	<b>Very much like me.</b>
30. I love to solve problems and develop new concepts.....	1	2	3	4	5
31. I am deeply concerned about others.....	1	2	3	4	5
32. I delight in colors, shapes, and textures of things more than other people do.....	1	2	3	4	5
33. I believe that dolls, stuffed animals, or the characters in books are alive and have feelings.....	1	2	3	4	5
34. Words and sounds create unusual images in my mind.....	1	2	3	4	5
35. My strong emotions move me to tears.....	1	2	3	4	5
36. I like to dig beneath the surface of issues.....	1	2	3	4	5
37. I am moved by beauty in nature.....	1	2	3	4	5
38. I am not sensitive to the color, shape and texture of things like some people are.....	1	2	3	4	5
39. When I am nervous, I need to do something physical.....	1	2	3	4	5
40. I try to analyze my thoughts and actions.....	1	2	3	4	5
41. I can feel a mixture of emotions all at once.....	1	2	3	4	5
42. I am the type of person who has to be active –walking, cleaning, organizing, doing something.....	1	2	3	4	5
43. I like to play with ideas and try to think about how to put them to use.....	1	2	3	4	5
44. I am an unemotional person.....	1	2	3	4	5
45. I enjoy the sensations of colors, shapes, and designs.....	1	2	3	4	5
46. The difference in aromas is interesting.....	1	2	3	4	5
47. I have a talent for fantasy.....	1	2	3	4	5
48. I love to listen to the sounds of nature.....	1	2	3	4	5
49. I take everything to heart.....	1	2	3	4	5
50. I thrive on intense physical activity, e.g. fast games and sports.....	1	2	3	4	5

APPENDIX B  
Overexcitabilities Characteristics

## Forms and Expressions of Overexcitability

(Michael M. Piechowski, "Overexcitabilities" in *Encyclopedia of Creativity*, volume 2, Academic Press, 1999)

### Psychomotor

#### *Surplus of energy*

Rapid speech, marked excitation, intense physical activity (e.g. fast games and sports) pressure for action, e.g. organizing), marked competitiveness.

#### *Psychomotor expression of emotional tension*

Compulsive talking and chattering, impulsive actions  
Nervous habits (tics, nail biting), workaholism, acting out.

### Sensual

#### *Enhanced sensory and aesthetic pleasure*

Seeing, smelling, tasting, touching, hearing  
Delight in beautiful objects, sounds of words, music, form, color, balance

#### *Sensual expression of emotional tension*

Overeating, sexual overindulgence, buying spree, wanting to be in the limelight.

### Intellectual

#### *Intensified activity of the mind*

Curiosity, concentration, capacity for sustained intellectual effort, avid reading;  
Keen observation, detailed visual recall, detailed planning

#### *Penchant for probing questions and problem solving*

Search for truth and understanding; forming new concepts;  
Tenacity for problem-solving

#### *Reflective thought*

Thinking about thinking, love of theory and analysis, preoccupation with logic,  
Moral thinking, introspection (but without self-judgment), conceptual and intuitive integration;  
Independence of thought (sometimes very critical)

### Imaginational

#### *Free play of imagination*

Frequent use of image and metaphor, facility for invention and fantasy,  
Facility for detailed visualization, poetic and dramatic perception,  
Animalistic and magical thinking

#### *Capacity for living in a world of fantasy*

Predilection for magic and fairy tales, creation of private worlds,  
Imaginary companions; dramatization

#### *Spontaneous imagery as an expression of emotional tension*

Animalistic imagery, mixing truth and fiction, elaborate dreams, illusions

#### *Low tolerance of boredom*

Need for novelty and variety

### Emotional

#### *Feelings and emotions intensified*

Positive feelings, negative feelings, extremes of emotion, complex emotions and feelings, identification  
With others' feelings, awareness of a whole range of feelings

#### *Strong somatic expressions*

Tense stomach, sinking heart, blushing, flushing, pounding heart, sweaty palms

#### *Strong affective expressions*

Inhibition (timidity, shyness); enthusiasm, ecstasy, euphoria, pride, strong affective memory; shame;  
Feelings of unreality, fears and anxieties, feelings of guilt, concern with death, depressive and suicidal moods

#### *Capacity for strong attachments, deep relationships*

Strong emotional ties and attachments to persons, living things, places; attachment to animals; difficulty  
Adjusting to new environments; compassion, responsiveness to others, sensitivity in relationships, loneliness;

#### *Well differentiated feelings toward self*

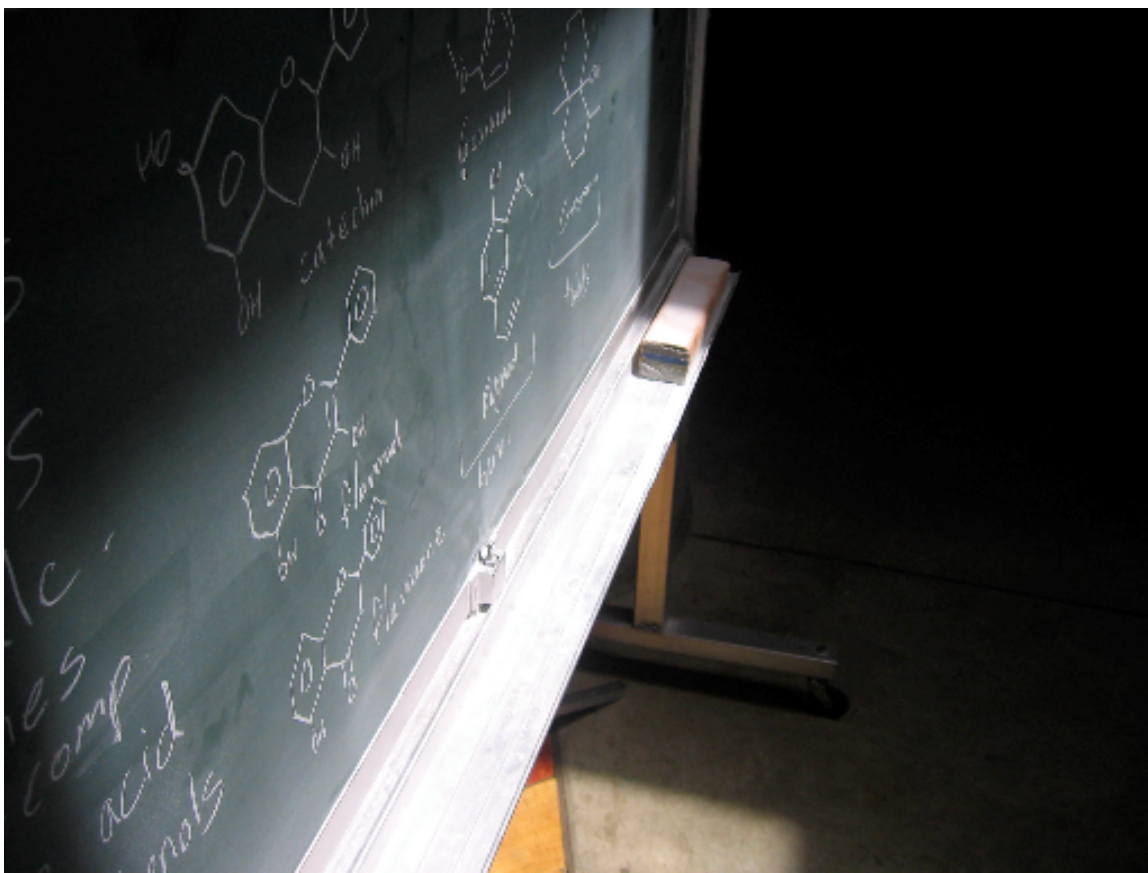
Inner dialogue and self-judgment



APPENDIX C  
Samples of Photo-elicitation



This is outside of my workplace, the building I worked at. I was feeling a little nostalgic of home and I didn't want to be at work at that time. Someone had made me mad. I think they corrected me or something. I know this wasn't a positive feeling. I felt trapped. And this shot was just so much congestion. All the buildings right on top of one another . . . I felt everything was closing in and I felt overwhelmed.  
(Edward's photo-elicitation picturing New York City.)



This is actually the chalkboard that I drew my diagrams on for the presentation. And that's the sunlight coming through and illuminating part of the chalkboard and that's very much like using the light of my intellect to diagram and use chemicals. And so it's knowledge really. I don't really think that knowledge is unemotional, like books and even things like chemistry that seem so dry. I get emotional about these things. I think about chemicals. Everything is connected and I think I cope, or work with or build upon a lot of the feelings and questions and mysteries of life by examining things. That's like this shining light of knowledge on work or academic things.

APPENDIX D  
Consent Form

## Consent Form

I, \_\_\_\_\_ agree to take part in research regarding the question: “How do gifted, late adolescent males experience and cope with Emotional Overexcitability?” This research is being conducted by Deborah P. Lathrop under the direction of Dr. Thomas Hebert, a faculty member at the University of Georgia. My participation is voluntary. I can refuse to participate or stop taking part at any time without giving any reason, and without penalty

The purpose for this study is to examine how gifted early adult males experience and cope with Emotional Overexcitability. This is an extreme form of emotionality that is particular to the gifted population.

The benefits that I can expect are: an increased understanding of the types of overexcitabilities that I possess, an understanding of Dabrowski’s personality and moral development theory and how it can aid in my development, and greater personal insight.

If I volunteer to take part in this study, I will be asked to do the following things:  
Take a ten minute long OEQII questionnaire,  
Participate in three, hour-long sessions that will be tape-recorded at a location I will specify,  
Take photographs on a roll of film,  
Review the data once it has been written down to check for validity.

In total, these items should take no longer than five hours.

Because some of the questions I will be asked are related to emotional experiences, it is likely that I could rekindle troublesome memories. This might cause me discomfort.

I understand that I will be given a \$25 gift certificate to Barnes and Noble as thanks for my participation.

My participation in this study will be kept confidential. The researcher will use a pseudonym in tape recorded and written documentation. All recorded tapes will be destroyed after the dissertation has been approved. I have been warned to keep any personal references out of taped sessions and out of the photographs I take. Any information that is obtained in connection with this study about me will remain confidential unless required by law (suicidal ideation or abuse).

The researcher will answer any further questions about the research, now or during the project, and can be reached by telephone at 770-346-0849.

My signature below indicates that the researcher has answered all my questions and that I consent to volunteer for this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

Deborah P. Lathrop  
(Researcher)

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Signature  
770-346-0849  
lathrops@aol.com

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Name of participant  
Signature

Any additional questions or problems regarding your rights as a research participant can be addressed to The Chairman, Institutional Review Board, University of Georgia, 612 Boyd Graduate Center, Athens, Georgia 30602-7411; Telephone (706) 542-3199; E-mail address IRB@uga.edu