Too smart for her own good?
An investigation of the social and psychological effects of being a high-academic achieving woman

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Too Smart for Her Own Good?

An investigation of the social and psychological effects of being a high academic achieving woman

Previous research suggests that high achieving women differ from high achieving men on a variety of components, most notably as a result of societal expectations. While today’s women are afforded greater educational opportunities than previous generations, behaviors associated with academic achievement (assertiveness, competition, and so on) may still conflict with current concepts of feminine identity (Kitano & Perkins, 2000). Unlike their male counterparts, most high achieving women have hidden their abilities for social purposes at some point in their lives, and are more likely to face hostility regarding their talents in both traditional and nontraditional settings (Noble, 1987).

The expectations placed upon gifted women are often inconsistent which may result in a type of “cultural confusion” in which these high achieving individuals are uncertain of their role as an intelligent woman. (Noble, 1987). A number of studies have noted the discrepancies between characteristics necessary for success in academia versus societal values for stereotypically feminine
behavior (Noldon, Sedlacek, 1998), (Wilgosh, 2001) (Stormont, Stebbins, Holliday, 2001). These conflicting roles may be a factor in the resulting ambivalence that intelligent women have reported in balancing educational development and personal life (Kitano & Perkins, 2000).

**Psychological Functioning of High Achieving Women**

Our primary research question focused upon the social and psychological challenges and risks high achieving college-aged women face. While it has been noted that high achieving women will most likely face a number of obstacles in their educational pursuits and social lives, there is little information regarding the psychological functioning or effective clinical interventions for this population (Noble 1987 & Kitano & Perkins, 2000). Therefore, there is need for further investigation into the internal and external factors which influence the experiences of high achieving women, and consequently the affects of these experiences on self concept and mental health. Despite the large number of studies focusing upon the educational process for women, there are notable gaps in the literature regarding high achieving women’s distinctive psychological process (Noble, 1987).
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Carol Gilligan’s Concept of the Divided Self

Secondly, we chose to investigate whether the ambivalence of high academic achieving women, would result in a type of splitting off as noted in Carol Gilligan’s research on women’s development. In her research, Gilligan has noted that many women engaged in a type of splitting off. Gilligan described this trend with an example from one of her female interviewees, whose response a question was, “Do you want to know what I think? Or what I really think?” Therefore, we also chose to explore whether these high achieving women would engage in a secondary type of splitting in terms of their intellect resulting in two levels of response, how women feel it is to be smart, and how women really feel it is to be smart.

Methods

The data for this study was collected from a sample of undergraduate students at Illinois Wesleyan University, a liberal arts university with approximately two thousand students. Participants were recruited through faculty recommendations and e-mail.

Participants

A total of nine participants were recruited for the purpose of this study. According to the selection criteria,
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all participants were female undergraduate students with junior or senior status, and met the definition of high academic achieving. For the purpose of this study, the definition of high academic achieving was a grade point average above a 3.3 (B+ average).

The age range of the participants was 20-22. All of the women were Caucasian. The participants represented a variety of majors including psychology (n=2), biology (n=2), English (n=2), chemistry (n=1), sociology (n=1), and music theatre (n=1).

Materials and Procedure

A semi-structured clinical interview session was utilized. The session included the completion of a basic demographic profile, Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Inventory (CES-D), the semi-structured interview which lasted 1 hour, and a collaborative free-write where participants were prompted to write for ten minutes regarding their relationship to their intellect.

Prospective participants were given written information regarding the study. Participants discussed questions about the study, and completed a consent form. Interviews were conducted on a one-to-one basis. The interview consisted of nine questions regarding the
participant’s perception of their intellect and their experiences as a high academic achieving woman. The interview script was utilized as a guide, but information that seemed particularly significant for individual participants was explored in greater detail. Each interview was audio-taped and transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

Using the method outlined by Miles & Huberman (1994), we conducted our first thematic coding. We read the transcript, and noted any seemingly significant quotations, emerging themes, and early interpretations. We repeated this process with each of the eight transcripts.

Data Reduction

Due to the particularly rich responses, we chose to limit our focus to question 5, “What is it like to be a smart woman? We randomly selected four of the transcripts, and performed a second thematic coding on these responses. During this process, a total of one hundred and five responses were identified and categorized in terms of the connections in these responses and common themes. We further analyzed each grouping of themes to produce a distinct categorization of major themes.
**Results**

Data analysis revealed two main categories of positive and negative responses. Both of these categories were broken down into emotional and social experiences. Table 1 lists these categories, their meanings, and the frequencies with which women in this sample responded in each category.

**Negative Responses**

The most frequent responses reflected negativity regarding individual participant’s identity as a smart woman. A large majority of participant responses (76%) fell into this broad category which was then further broken down into emotional and social experiences.

Negative emotional and social responses were further broken down into three subcategories: perfectionism, stress and pressure, identity splitting off, and social group splitting off. Table 2 reflects these categories, example responses, and the frequencies with which participants responded in each category.

Fifteen percent of the total negative responses related to perfectionism. For example, one participant stated, “And so like even though I could do nothing and get straight A’s and a 4.0 GPA I put so much pressure on myself to be perfect and I still do.”
Twelve percent of these responses were in regards to stress and pressure. The women described these feelings as self-inflicted. One participant said, “I think that...as far as my emotional state I’m usually you know stressed and you know anxious and stuff” while another mentioned, “As long as I can remember I have always been a person who has a high stress level.”

Ten percent of the total responses described a sort of self splitting off where the participants failed to integrate being intelligent with being a woman. For example, one of the participants stated, “I don’t think I ever thought of myself as like a smart woman...Like I thought of myself as a woman, and I always thought of myself as smart but never like connected.” Two other women responded similarly One stated, “For me personally I’ve never thought of it as...I just don’t make a differential between being a smart woman and I don’t know. I don’t know really how to separate that out” while the other mentioned, “I guess I’ve...never considered like how being a woman affects my intelligence.”

Seven percent of the participants’ responses discussed a type of splitting off of social groups where the woman would have one group of similarly high achieving peers and
another group of friends who had less academic achievements. The women found distinct difficulties in maintaining relationships in both groups. For example, one woman described her experience as follows, “The smart kids were like jealous of me and then the less smart kids like didn’t understand me.” The same participant later described her friends that had not pursued a college education, “I can’t really talk to any of them now that I’m in college because I mean they just don’t understand anything that I’m talking about really...like any of the things that interest me.”

The remaining 56 percent of negative responses represented a broad range of emotions and social experiences. For example, in regards to emotions one participant stated, “It’s totally affected my emotional life because I put so much stress on myself” while another responded “I’ve kind of flipped out a couple of times last week um because of academics.” Negative responses to social life included, “That was something somebody brought to my attention that like it ruined our friendship because like I got better grades than her” and “People perceived me as like being cocky or whatever about my grades which I totally don’t get.”
Positive Responses

The second major categorization of participant responses were positive in regards to being a smart woman which represented 30% of the total. The responses again covered a broad range of emotional and social experiences with no major sub-categories represented. However, the positive responses were focused on how being smart helped them in concrete ways. For example, one participant responded, “I think just being smart in general gives you more opportunities.” Other participants described enjoying their intellect, including one participant who stated, “I think as far as being...a smart person...I like being smart.” and another who mentioned “I like when I can get A’s. I think that makes me feel...good.”

Participants also made comments about some of the positive experiences they have had in regards to their social life. Many of these responses reflected finding a social group with similar academic achievement. One of the participants explained this by stating, “I think you can find peers that are...as dedicated or as motivated as you in terms of academics...they become your social life.”
Discussion

In this sample, high achieving college-aged women reported more negative than positive responses. The positive responses were focused on how being smart helped them in concrete ways whereas negative responses focused on emotions that are self-generated. The negative responses also suggest a splitting off of social groups.

Of particular interest was the women’s failure to integrate intelligence with gender. These results also suggest that high academic achieving women may engage in a secondary splitting off of their intellect thus reflecting a similar finding to Gilligan’s theories on the psychological development of women (Gilligan, 1982).

One possible interpretation of this finding is that while the participants had a large number of comments on the negative aspects of being a smart woman such as it being a source of stress and pressure, it brings out the perfectionist, it is a source of social rejection, and it results in a feeling that “no one understands me”, the small but noteworthy percentage of strong resilient responses, such as “It helps”, “You may not be pretty, you may not be popular, but you sure as hell are smart”, and “I
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Like being smart” reflect what these women feel it is really like to be a smart woman.

Clinical Implications

The current findings have implications for clinicians and educators who work with high achieving women, particularly to those who are interested in psychological development of college-aged women. During each of the interviews, the women were asked “What steps could a university take to better support the psychological and social development of high academic achieving women?” While most of the women mentioned they were aware of free counseling services on their campus, many did not feel this would directly benefit them, which leads us to believe that high-academic achieving women are not utilizing these professional resources.

The women suggestions focused on changes in the educational structure. This included reducing primarily the focus on competition in the classroom and providing opportunity for individualized assignments (i.e. poster presentations, papers with self-selected topics) as opposed to more standardized examinations. Other suggestions included providing opportunities for mentorship with women in various fields of study, and increasing awareness of
issues specific to high academic achieving women to university faculty and staff. These results coincide with previous research which suggests that the reason female college students may become less competitive than their male counterparts is not related to capability but may be due to a lack of support provided in the classroom (Reis & Dobyns, 1991).

Conclusions

The objective of this study was to explore the experience of high academic-achieving college aged women. While this study has limited generalizability due to the small sample size and lack of diversity, it may provide some focus for future research in the narratives of intelligent college-aged women. While there was an overwhelming response to the negative aspects of being a smart women, it is hopeful that these women did mention a small but noteworthy number of strong, resilient responses which may be of particular interest in future study.
References


Table Caption

Table 1: Major Thematic Categories and Frequency of Response to Being a Smart Woman.

Table 2: Thematic Sub-Categories of Negative Responses to Being a Smart Woman.
## Table 1

**Frequency of Response in Categories for Being a Smart Woman (n=105)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>n</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive Total</td>
<td>Responses which reflect a general positive regard for one’s intellect; includes positive emotions or social experiences.</td>
<td>22.9%</td>
<td>24</td>
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<tr>
<td>Negative Total</td>
<td>Responses which reflect a general negative regard for one’s intellect; includes positive emotions or social experience.</td>
<td>77.1%</td>
<td>81</td>
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Table 2

*Frequency of Response in Categories for Negative Experiences (n=81)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Example Responses</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>n</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perfectionism</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stress/Pressure</td>
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<td>Self-Splitting</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social-Splitting</td>
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Figure Captions

*Figure 1.* Representation of Carol Gilligan’s concept of the divided self.

*Figure 2.* Possible interpretation of results in relation to Carol Gilligan’s concept of the divided self.