

EXTENDED SUMMARY:**GIFTEDNESS AND EATING DISORDERS:
VULNERABILITY OR PROTECTION?****Dra. Laura Hernangómez Criado**

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This article was published in Spanish. This is the English version.

Link to the Spanish version: (<https://doi.org/10.33898/rdp.v31i115.357>).

How to reference this article:

Hernangómez Criado, L. (2020). Altas Capacidades y Trastornos Alimentarios: ¿Vulnerabilidad o Protección?. [Giftedness and Eating Disorders: Vulnerability or Protection?]. *Revista de Psicoterapia*, 31(115), 77-95. <https://doi.org/10.33898/rdp.v31i115.357>

Abstract

In this article, relationship between giftedness and eating disorders is explored by reviewing the factors which may explain their connection: asynchronies, sensitivity and perfectionism. Provided further knowledge of the processes which may lead to psychopathology, it is concluded that these variables become vulnerability factors because of their interaction with an environment that is poorly responsive to the needs of the gifted child. However, it would be possible to design different settings to prevent this: paying attention to socio-affective development, promotion and appreciation of creativity, and stimulating educational environments in which the learning process is more important than performance goals could have a significant impact on prevention of eating disorders.

Keywords: *Giftedness, High intellectual capacity, High Ability, Eating disorders, Vulnerability, Asynchrony, Perfectionism, Sensitivity.*



Introduction

Over the last decades, the relationship between eating disorders and high cognitive ability has been only treated as a descriptive data. But we need to know processes that make giftedness turn into a vulnerability factor in order to design prevention strategies and optimize our interventions.

Reviewing research on giftedness is not easy since approaches to defining and operationalizing it vary considerably across empirical studies: test scores are frequently used as the only marker of giftedness, some studies sample participants based on their academic achievement, measures of creativity are seldom included and lacking comparative groups often limit and confound the interpretation of results. Nevertheless, some conclusions emerge: giftedness should act as a protective factor, but some gifted adolescents seem more vulnerable to eating disorders. Three characteristics, traditionally associated with giftedness, can contribute to explain it: asynchronies, sensitivity and perfectionism. However, none of them must be considered as individual variables: it's the interaction with certain environmental factors what origins the risk.

Asynchronies

Asynchronies refer to the disparities arising from the difference between a child's chronological age and his/her mental ability (Terrasier, 1992).

Emotional-cognitive asynchrony can be a pathway to emotion regulation difficulties, a core vulnerability feature in eating disorders (e.g: Fairburn, Cooper & Shafran, 2003, 2008; Meule et al, 2019). Perceiving the advanced cognitive capacities can bias adult expectations for child emotional reactions in an unrealistic way (halo effect). Then, the child can: (1) try to live up to those expectations, ignoring his/her own emotions, or (2) amplify his/her emotional expression in order to provoke a response, what can finally evoke invalidation, initiating a vicious cycle. Both emotional difficulties are related to eating disorders (Hernangómez, 2018).

Adult expectations for child behavior can be a problem, too. If the gifted children don't show emotional vulnerabilities to adults, preferring to protect a positive image instead, it can be a risk they have developmentally inappropriate family responsibilities (Peterson, 2009). Another risk is that teachers suppose gifted students as being better adjusted than they really are, confounding academic achievement with social and emotional well-being (Vialle, Heaven & Ciarrochi, 2007). With no purposeful attention to social and emotional concerns by significant adults, gifted children may not express their needs, and can think intellectual dimension is the only facet in which the adults are interested. Then, they may feel their worth is contingent on their intelligence or performance, what is a vulnerable self-esteem.

At school, the lack of challenge in early academic experiences, given their advanced cognitive level, may result in adopting perfection as their

standard for success (Moon, 2009) and overinvolvement in extracurricular activities, with the subsequent stress (Kerr & Multon, 2015; Peterson, 2009). Gender bias can add a conflict to gifted girls: they may be early aware of sexism and reject strongly the status of the female gender role, so gender identity formation may be more complicated (i.g: Kerr y Multon, 2015), what is related to vulnerability to body dissatisfaction and eating symptoms (Choate, 2005; Lovejoy, 2001).

Asynchrony also impacts on peer relationships and developing identity. The risk of stigma and bullying must be considered (González-Cabrera, Tourón, León-Mejía & Machimbarrena, 2018; Peterson & Ray, 2006), as well as effects of labeling on self-concept of the gifted (Baudson & Ziemes, 2016). Feelings of being different may engender social stress so they engage in diverse coping strategies to manage the image of themselves that is available to peers (Swiatek & Cross, 2007), such as the use of conformity and helping others in order to avoid the stigma and get social acceptance (Chan, 2005). Eating symptoms may play a role in this social coping.

School settings have a determinant role since they create different types of social contexts, which influence on acceptance of difference (Eddles-Hirsch, Vialle, McCormick, & Rogers, 2012). Contact with other gifted individuals may facilitate psychosocial adjustment and thus support positive identity development. So, gifted grouping makes sense not only from an achievement-related point of view but also from a social-emotional perspective (Baudson & Ziemes, 2016).

Sensitivity

Emotional intensity and sensitivity have often been often associated with giftedness. However, there are different uses of the term “sensitivity”. Thus, we could differentiate those perspectives that have focused on the arousability of the nervous system (overexcitabilities, Dabrowski, 1972; sensory-processing sensitivity, Aron & Aron, 1997; sensory sensitivities, Dunn, 1999, 2007) and those that have focused on metacognition (Multifaceted Perspective of Sensitivity, Mendaglio, 1995).

Arousability of the nervous system: Both overexcitability and sensory-processing sensitivity refer to a high inherited responsiveness of the nervous system (Homberg, Schubert, Asan y Aron, 2016; Mendaglio, 2012) in processing internal and external stimuli (Greven et al., 2019; Piechowski, 1979, 2006). The relationship between giftedness and overexcitabilities has been confirmed especially when artistic creativity is used as a criterion to detect giftedness (Mendaglio and Tillier, 2006; Mendaglio, Kettler and Rinn, 2019). On the other hand, the relationships among overexcitabilities (OEs) and facets of Openness to experience indicate that they represent the same underlying construct with different names, and Openness to experience is high in creative individuals regardless of creative domain (Vuyk, Krieshok y Kerr, 2016). In a similar way, sensory-processing sensitivity seems to be related to creativity (Bridges and Schendan, 2019), although comparative data

with control samples are needed (Rinn, Mullet, Jett & Nyikos, 2018). In sum, empirical data suggest that higher than average intelligence facilitates greater sensitivity, which is different from supposing a bidirectional relationship. Given the relationship between sensitivity and creativity, and since high intelligence is a necessary but not sufficient condition for creativity, it is possible that creativity, and not intelligence, is what explains the relation between giftedness and sensitivity. Unfortunately, the inclusion of creativity as a necessary criterion in the detection of high capacities is not a common practice in research, what would be needed to confirm this hypothesis.

Openness to experience could be considered a specific marker of vulnerability to eating disorders since it is the only trait of the Big Five that is not usually related to psychopathology (Malouff, Thorsteinsson and Schutte, 2005) but is related to eating disorders (Bollen and Wojciechowski, 2004; Ghaderi and Scott, 2000; MacLaren and Best, 2009). So, according to the differential-susceptibility hypothesis, High Openness reflects a rich and complex imaginative and emotional life, which may contribute to good adjustment when accompanied by a supportive and enriching environment but predispose to suffer the negative consequences of environmental adversities more than others.

Sensory sensitivities, as measured by Dunn's (1999) Sensory Profile, are associated too with giftedness (Gere, Capps, Mitchell y Grubbs, 2009) and eating disorders (Merwin, Moskovich, Wagner, Ritschel, Craighead y Zucker, 2013; Zucker, Merwin, Bulik, Moskovich, Wildes y Groh, 2013).

Meta-cognitive skills: Mendaglio (1995) proposed a multifaceted approach to conceptualize sensitivity as an awareness of thoughts, feelings or behaviors of oneself or others, and is comprised of four dimensions including cognitive, affective, interpersonal, and intrapersonal. These are metacognitive skills, including regulation strategies (Carcione y Falcone, 2002). But the impact of cognitive ability decreases with increasing abilities. In other words, a certain level of cognitive ability may be a necessary but not sufficient condition for metacognition. We need to take into account socio-affective variables in order to understand the origin of metacognitive capacity, especially when we know metacognitive skills can predict the prognosis of eating symptomatology (Tasca, 2019).

Sensitivity and eating disorders: Different pathways to eating disorder can exist in the cognitive-emotional tasks of processing in a sensitive person. Since eating behavior is a multisensory experience, an integration process deficit may exist, giving rise to a "sensory eating disorder" (Galiana, Muñoz y Beato, 2017). In another way, sensory sensitivity causes intense and frequent emotional activation that would need to be accepted and named as an emotion, since the opposite (activation without an emotional interpretation) may predispose to alterations in body image (Monteleone et al., 2017). The relationship between sensory sensitivity and alterations in body image has been demonstrated (Zucker et al, 2013). What is more, the person needs strategies to tolerate and regulate that emotional activation, since

eating symptoms fulfill that function in a maladaptive way (Merwin et al., 2013). In addition, impulsivity would facilitate, along with emotional intensity, a quickly emitted behavior, without forethought, like compulsive and purgative symptoms.

Perfectionism

Both eating disorders and giftedness are characterized by elevated levels of perfectionistic strivings (Bardone-Cone et al, 2007; Sassarolli, Lauro, Ruggiero, Mauri, Vinai y Frost, 2008; Stricker, Buecker, Schneider y Preckel, 2019). Although the magnitude of the effect size indicates that perfectionism is not a core characteristic of giftedness (Stricker et al, 2019) it doesn't downplay the role of perfectionism in emotional vulnerability. Perfectionistic gifted adolescents are often "pleasers", model students with excellent grades and good behaviors what make it difficult for teachers or parents to discover emotional distress until dangerous symptoms, like eating disorders, appear.

There are several factors that can contribute to development of perfectionism in giftedness: the lack of challenge in early school years, receiving praises based on "intelligence" like an internal trait, underestimating social and affective virtues and sensitivity, since it is associated with openness to societal influence and being better at spotting and avoiding errors. Praises based on "intelligence" may convey to the child that this trait is what does really matter and that it can be judged from outward performance, so he/she can't afford a poor result. The focus on their cognitive abilities can make invisible their strengths in other areas with the risk of self-worth tied to achievement and a constant fear of disappointing others.

Conclusions

The relationship between giftedness and eating disorders is probably due to the interaction with a context that is poorly responsive to the needs of the gifted child. It would be possible to design different settings to prevent this: paying attention to socio-affective development, promotion and appreciation of creativity, and stimulating educational environments in which the learning process is more important than performance goals could have a significant impact on prevention of eating disorders.