FEATURE

When Emotional Intensity and Cognitive Rigidity Collide

What Can Counselors and Teachers Do?

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Abstract: Gifted individuals have unique social and emotional needs that often manifest as challenging interpersonal behavior. Chief among these needs are the fact that gifted students tend to be quite emotionally intense and that they tend to be quite cognitively rigid. Emotional intensity is defined as having stronger, more frequent, more complex, and more lasting emotional responses than would be considered typical. Cognitive rigidity is defined as difficulty in changing mental sets. The intersection of these two traits in the gifted population makes interventions challenging, but the impact of these traits can affect a person's personal, social, and emotional growth. There are therapeutic techniques that can allow counselors, teachers, parents, and psychologists to positively impact these limiting traits. This article examines relevant literature on the subjects above, provides a case example from the author's mental health practice, and explores potential interventions.

Keywords: social/emotional needs, cognitive development, psychosocial development

> "The gifted student is quick to make an analysis of a situation, but it is much harder to undo the cognitive impact of that creation."

Introduction

"FOR PAW PATROL!!!!!!!!!"

With that unusual cry, three middle school students burst out of the waiting room and into my office space. The other seven students, already seated for this week's group therapy session, audibly groaned. Clearly, they had seen and heard this before. Catching one student (a seventh grade girl named Rose) rolling her eyes, one of the "Paw Patrol" students (an eighth-grade boy named Steve) quickly rounded on her. "What?! You have a problem with Paw Patrol?"

Before she could respond, he continued. "Because I believe in Paw Patrol. It's a religion to me. I know you don't like it. But I believe in it. So if you don't like that, you're being racist." He turned to me, "Dr. Z, she's being racist. Make her stop or I'll leave group forever."

It was five minutes into the second day of group.

I had recently joined a private group psychotherapy practice where I felt that I could assist the area's significant gifted population in developing social and emotional skills. The practice was doing well, and I had been able to establish a psychotherapy group fairly quickly. We had decided to focus on interpersonal growth and the development of skills that these students could take back to their respective schools. While some of the students went to school together and attended the same gifted education program, the group had a wide footprint in terms of geographical location, age, and level of functioning.

I will continue to refer to the "Paw Patrol" incident throughout this manuscript as I feel that the type and tone of the interaction is quite common among gifted individuals who are cognitively rigid and emotionally intense. It is my hope that explaining the incident and the way that it was handled in group is educational to the reader. I will detail the intervention that I used but also suggest some other techniques that would

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be helpful in this area, along with guidelines on how to effectively implement them.

As this example is from my clinical practice, it is worth noting that I have changed some identifying aspects of the individuals involved to protect their confidentiality. I have tried to keep the dialogue as verbatim as possible, although I have made edits to improve flow and clarity.

Brief Relevant Background

Working with gifted students requires understanding and accommodating some of the significant social-emotional idiosyncrasies that often occur in this population (Fonseca, 2015; Peterson, 2015). Gifted students think quickly and deeply (Colangelo & Wood, 2015). They are opinionated and passionate about those opinions (Cross, 2007; Inman & Kirchner, 2016). They are often socially off-beat and can struggle to connect with same-age peers (Coleman & Cross, 2005; Cross, 2007; Reis & Renzulli, 2004). Perhaps most importantly for this article, gifted students are emotionally intense, with reactions that are more frequent and intense than same-age peers (Cross, 2007; Fonseca, 2015).

Emotional Intensity

Emotional intensity is defined as having emotional responses that are stronger, more frequent, longer lasting, and are more complex than a typical person would experience (Sword, 2005). Researchers suggest that these differences are linked to neurological differences (Gottlieb, Hyde, Immordino-Yang, & Kaufman, 2015). The heightened functioning of the limbic system indicates that, for gifted individuals, more neurological functions are laden with emotional content (Thompson & Oehlert, 2010; Waisman, Leikin, Shaul, & Leikin, 2014).

Every person is different in terms of the expression of feelings, although patterns tend to emerge over time (Francis, Hawes, & Abbott, 2016; Olszewski-Kubilius, Lee, & Thomson, 2014). For example, as I learned more about Steve, his outburst in group became less shocking and more another example of a significant social asynchrony. Steve has decided that he likes the TV show Paw Patrol. While this is nominally a show for very young children, Steve enjoys it because he understands the lessons and feels inspired. He has recruited his friends to feel similarly about his interest. His peers, who are equally socially asynchronous, respond positively to the attention that Steve gives to engage them in this interaction. His other same-age peers, however, do not understand this interest (let alone the intensity of his interest), and give him social feedback. This feedback does not feel comfortable to Steve and he gets upset.

Steve responds to his upset feeling by doing two things that demonstrate his intensity. First, he lashes out emotionally with surprisingly intense emotionality, as described above. Second, he cognitively recommits to his idea of liking Paw Patrol, "doubling down" on the concept to protect himself against being or feeling wrong. This behavior demonstrates the cognitive rigidity or "black and white thinking" that may be seen in gifted individuals (O'Toole, & Barnes-Holmes, 2009; Riaz, Shahzad, Riaz, & Khanam, 2013; Webb, 2014).

Cognitive Rigidity

Cognitive rigidity, commonly defined as difficulty in changing mental sets, contributes to the emotional intensity of gifted students (Coplan, 2010; Francis et al., 2016; Riaz et al., 2013). Cognitive rigidity precludes individuals from being able to entertain alternate possibilities and explanations for a person, event, or thing (Coplan, 2010; Francis et al., 2016; Rimm, 2008). Gifted students tend to engage with material deeply and care deeply about what they know about (Callahan & Hertberg-Davis, 2012; Webb, 2013). Strongly held beliefs are not inherently a problem, of course, and can even be adaptive in some situations (Francis et al., 2016; Vries, Prins, Schmand, & Geurts, 2015). But when a person makes a quick assessment about something, and that assessment is laden with emotion, a person can quickly become "boxed in" to that opinion, which limits their opportunities for growth (Bock, Gallaway, & Hund, 2015; Coplan, 2010).

Cognitive rigidity is often observed in the classroom setting with gifted children (Eklund, Tanner, Stoll, & Anway, 2015). This is the student who argues with the teacher and peers about points both arcane and relevant but, essentially, refuses to respond to new information or alter a mind-set based on feedback. While this behavior is difficult in the classroom setting, the relatively objective nature of knowledge makes cognitive rigidity interventions in academic settings somewhat manageable (Donovan, 2012; Webb, Gore, Amend, & DeVries, 2007): Debates can be scheduled, research can be assigned, and conversations can be tabled to a later date (Gottlieb et al., 2015).

Of course, there is a social aspect to learning that significantly impacts all students, but gifted individuals may feel the impact of their peers more strongly (Rimm, 2008; Vries et al., 2015). To illustrate this point, let us return to the example from earlier about Steve. Steve's thoughts (in this case, about Paw Patrol) are infused with more emotion, so a challenge to his thoughts impacts him more because it feels to him that he has more invested in those thoughts (Cross, 2007; Eklund et al., 2015; Olszewski-Kubilius et al., 2014; Webb et al., 2007). His investment, in turn, has engaged him personally in the topic. To protect himself against the idea that his thought was "wrong," he begins to argue his points voraciously, aggressively distancing himself from the chance that he had done something foolish. The threat, either consciously or unconsciously, was that being caught in having a "wrong" opinion would be wounding to his sense of self as a smart person (Peterson, 2015; Reis & Renzulli, 2004). In this case, Steve began to list all the reasons that Paw Patrol was "the best show on television of all time," due to its "family-friendly message," and "because it's written by psychologists." (Note: from the author's research, it does not appear to be.) In Steve's mind, if he were able to convince his peers that Paw Patrol was a good show, his opinions and

behavior would be validated, and the risk of embarrassment would decrease.

Processing the Outburst

While trying to convince his peers that his opinions are correct, Steve also begins to feel self-conscious and threatened, which are uncomfortable emotions. To manage these feelings and protect himself, he lashes out emotionally at his peers in a big way. When processing the outburst afterward, Steve was able to report that Ruth's eye roll was a "3" on an imaginary 1 to 10 scale of emotional hurt, with 10 being the most intense. He rated his own yelling and threatening to quit the group at an "8" on the same scale. Steve's response to his peer's action was far more intense than the provoking stimulus seemed to warrant. Interestingly, Steve independently added that, at the time of the incident, he would have rated Ruth's eye roll as an "11" on the same scale. He reported that her behavior "didn't feel like she was disagreeing with me liking Paw Patrol; it felt like she was hating me."

Like Steve, many gifted students report difficulty in separating their own senses of self from their points of view (Meltzer, 2014). As stated before, gifted students care deeply about their areas of interest (Callahan & Hertberg-Davis, 2012; Rimm, 2008; Webb et al., 2007). Clearly, Steve has a lot of emotion tied up in his opinion, so much so that he showed quite intense behavior (Calderon, Subotnik, Knotek, Rayhack, & Gorgia, 2007; Cross, 2007). Yet he was able to report a diminished level of emotion shortly after a 50-min group therapy session.

While Steve was able to show some reflection on his behavior after the fact, the impact of his outburst was felt in the group. As the group is for gifted individuals, the same emotional intensities and social asynchronies are at work in his peers. These asynchronies were evidenced in the different reactions to the outburst, which were marked by emotional intensity, an inability to "move on," and a relatively juvenile escalated response. There was name-calling, pouting, and threats of ending friendships. Most of these students were in high school, yet it felt like I was managing third graders (but with college-level vocabularies). I will admit that I didn't fully appreciate the gifted group's social asynchrony until a week later when an outburst occurred in a different (nongifted) social skills group: a student cursed at another student, but the group managed the interaction independently and returned to emotional equilibrium within minutes. The students in the latter group demonstrated a developmental synchronicity in this moment, showing the emotional and social maturity one might expect from high school students.

In our case example, tensions were high. On one hand, Steve's friends immediately jumped to his defense, also claiming "racism" and threatening to leave the group. (It is worth noting for this discussion that all the students in this psychotherapy group are Caucasian; it is unclear whether Steve is intentionally using the word "racism" incorrectly.) It seems likely that their self-protective instincts engaged as well, after facing similar self-doubt for aligning themselves with Steve's opinion and wanting to ensure that their choices were not found to be socially inept. On the other hand, Rose called the behavior "really immature" and began making baby sounds when Steve tried to talk. Rose's friends also jumped into the fray, saying that if Paw Patrol was a religion, then they were "Paw Patrol atheists" who were "committed to the destruction of all things Paw Patrol." Voices were raised, and tears were shed. It was quite chaotic.

It was the second day of group and it felt as though a "holy war" had erupted. For a moment, it seemed that the group had splintered beyond repair. If you work with gifted students, I will wager that you have observed something similar and have also felt that nothing could be done to repair the situation. Thankfully, the same research that helps practitioners to understand these challenging traits also provides the world with potential workable interventions.

Interventions

Two areas of functioning that are often in need of development for a gifted person are those referenced in this manuscript: emotional intensity and cognitive rigidity.

Treating Emotional Intensity

When treating emotional intensity, some clarification is necessary for the client to succeed. To wit, it is common in therapy for a person to say, "I don't want to be angry anymore." While admirable on the surface, this goal is impossible. Even if it was possible to "turn off" anger, there are times and places in life where anger is appropriate, even adaptive. What people really want is the ability to control their anger, both in terms of how and how often it manifests. In the same vein, people who are cognitively rigid are often convinced of their righteousness in situations involving differences of opinion. These people will say, "I just want everyone to agree with me and/or be less stupid." It is beneficial to remind clients that there is no way to control the behaviors or opinions of others. What can be done instead is give the self the tools to manage others and tolerate their differences in a prosocial manner.

Picture someone who is very emotionally upset. That person is probably speaking quickly and loudly, and the face looks angry. The person's body is tensed and agitated; perhaps the person is breathing hard or sweating. As discussed earlier, the brain plays a major role in the experience of emotional intensity, but the impact of the brain's reactions is felt throughout the body (Blair & Raver, 2015; Zeidner & Matthews, 2017). Therefore, helping someone to manage their emotional intensity requires interventions that occur in both the brain and body.

Physiologically speaking, an emotional cue in the brain activates the sympathetic nervous system, the body's "flight or fight" system, which unleashes hormones and changes

respiration and heart rates to prepare the body to respond to an external threat (Reeck, Ames, & Ochsner, 2016). The more the body responds to threat, the harder it is to undo those biological changes (Graziano & Hart, 2016). The body's parasympathetic nervous system has the task to return the body to homeostasis, a process that takes time and energy (Reeck et al., 2016), while the system will eventually achieve equilibrium, helping the process along has significant emotional, social, and psychological benefits (Graziano & Hart, 2016; Schwager & Rothermund, 2014).

When a person is emotionally activated, the sympathetic nervous system has engaged their cognitive system in ways that can make them less open to assistance (Schwager & Rothermund, 2014). For the purposes of therapeutic intervention, emotionally activated people are less able to access the higher-order thinking in their cerebral cortex such as analysis, perspective taking, considering alternative explanations, and reality testing (Blair & Raver, 2015; Schwager & Rothermund, 2014). If you have ever tried to reason with a 3-year-old who is in the midst of a temper tantrum, you can understand that rational thinking can be difficult to access when a person is upset.

Therein lies the first strategy for managing intense emotions: wait them out (Fonseca, 2015; Zeidner & Matthews, 2017). When I work with families in therapy, I refer to big emotions as thunderstorms. Thunderstorms are big, intense, and can be quite scary; the good news is that they do not last forever. Does getting angry at a thunderstorm make it go away faster? No, and if you try to move forward with your plans despite the storm warnings, you may get hurt. If you accept that your plans are on hold until the storm has run its course, then everyone will be safer in the long run. It is important although to not give up on your plans because of a storm, of course. It is possible to still retain control in life while being humble in the face of big environmental challenges. Once things are calm, you can move forward with your day's plans effectively, just as you could move forward with talking rationally with an angry 12-year-old that has begun to calm down.

During intense "storms," it is easy for the entire focus of the world to be on the child's anger but this natural inclination should be avoided or minimized at best. Prolonged attention can strengthen the big emotions and fuel further outbursts. When Steve had his outburst in group therapy, there was the potential for his intense anger to overwhelm the entire group process. Instead, I gave him two things that all children, especially gifted children, respond well to: support and boundaries (Inman & Kirchner, 2016; Kennedy-Moore & Lowenthal, 2011).

I first validated Steve's emotions. "I can see that this is really upsetting you, Steve. I'm sorry that is happening to you." There is an impulse to deny or dismiss emotional reactions that feel out of nowhere or oversized, but as caregivers it is important to ignore that instinct and attend to the feeling (Fonseca, 2015; Reeck et al., 2016). Ignoring or minimizing a person's feeling can actually cause that feeling to grow or change, either of which can make the process of regaining emotional equilibrium more challenging (Schwager & Rothermund, 2014).

Second, I gave Steve a clear boundary. "We can't talk about how you're feeling right now, but I promise you that we will discuss it after group is over. If you don't feel that you can attend group positively, then you can sit in the waiting room and work on your deep breathing until we are done." This second part of this technique is something that I refer to as "backyarding." When I was young and my mother needed me to get out of the house, she would tell me "to go play in backyard, but stay there." While I was in the backyard, I could do whatever I wanted. I had choices, but within a broader, safe structure where I could play until I was regulated enough to do whatever my mother needed me to do. With Steve, he knew that I cared because I had said so explicitly; he also knew when I would address his concerns and he had concrete advice as to what to do until that time arrived.

Working with emotionally activated gifted students requires similar communicative skills around emotions (Fornia & Frame, 2001). Gifted children respond well to having choices, even if they occur within a broader structure (Kennedy-Moore & Lowenthal, 2011; Olszewski-Kubilius et al., 2014). In the case of emotional intensity, providing the structure that the emotions have been seen and will be addressed later provides important context to the person who is upset. In this particular situation, I was able to be more concrete by saying that we were going to talk after the group was over; it is advisable to give concrete structure rather than a nebulous "later," which some gifted students will reject for being insincere or unclear (Inman & Kirchner, 2016).

Third, I suggested that Steve work on deep breathing while he waited for group to end. Deep breathing is one of a myriad of ways that people can regain some control over their physiological process (Reeck et al., 2016; Schwager & Rothermund, 2014; Zeidner & Matthews, 2017). Engaging in slow, deep, diaphragmatic breaths informs the body, particularly the parasympathetic nervous system, the immediate threat is over, and the body can return to its resting state (Graziano & Hart, 2016). In this case, Steve went into the lobby, engaged in about 3 min of deep breathing, and was able to return to group without major incident.

Deep breathing is not for everyone. Other physiological regulatory strategies include mindful meditation, guided imagery (i.e., imaging a calming location or accessing a preferred memory), rubbing tactile objects (i.e., coins, leather, and fidget spinners) with fingertips, and distractor tasks such as drawing or writing (Cassone, 2015; Reeck et al., 2016; Smalley et al., 2009; Zylowska, 2012). It is worth exploring these different strategies with the gifted individual to see which feels best to enhance the chance of the skill being used. These strategies release hormones in the body that facilitate the process of homeostasis and, vitally, reengage higher-level

thinking processes, including accessing coping skills (Cross, 2007; Fonseca, 2015; Graziano & Hart, 2016). To further the metaphor from before: we cannot make a thunderstorm go away faster, but there are tools (flashlights, umbrellas, and galoshes) that make managing the storm easier. It is important to practice these skills such that the person can more readily access them when needed (Graziano & Hart, 2016; Reeck et al., 2016).

It is also important to note that I gave Steve a strategy to help him calm down. Since I was telling Steve not to do something (be in group), I also had to give him something to do to fill the space. A common mistake that parents and teachers make when working with gifted students is they will command a negative action (i.e., "Stop reading your book!") without a replacement behavior offered. Like nature, behavior abhors a vacuum. If I had sent Steve out of group without a replacement task (in this case, deep breathing), then his chances of getting into trouble would have skyrocketed. When correcting a negative behavior, the chances of success are highly improved if the person is given something to do instead.

Finally, I had to follow through on my promise to Steve to process the incident with him after group had concluded. Cognitive strategies for processing emotional intensity were detailed above, including the use of scaling questions ("Rate what happened on a scale of 1-10."), longitudinal questions ("How are you feeling now? How were you feeling when this happened? What changed?"), and questions about the personal narrative ("Tell me how this incident made you feel?"). Encouraging the child to name their feeling ("I'm SO MAD!"), even if it's obvious, also facilitates the process of de-escalation, as it helps the person regain some cognitive control (Graziano & Hart, 2016; Zeidner & Matthews, 2017). When the person has begun to calm down, engaging the higher-order thinking processes helps the person to continue the process of regulation (Graziano & Hart, 2016).

These questions also inject the thought process with perspective and context (Fonseca, 2015; Graziano & Hart, 2016). Longitudinal questions elicit commentary about change when, given the fact that it is remarkably difficult to sustain high levels of emotion over long periods of time (Francis et al., 2016), people are likely to feel better by the time the question gets asked (Rimm, 2008; Webb, 2014). Questions can also be asked about potential alternative explanations for the event that occurred, such as probing for whether the behavior was intentional or accidental.

Engaging in cognitive exploration provides additional perspective and allows the student to practice cognitive flexibility (Riaz et al., 2013). Even post facto analysis primes the student to consider multiple, and hopefully less malicious, explanations for others' behavior in the future (Bock et al., 2015; Vries et al., 2015). When the student can consider multiple perspectives it gains context, the immediate emotional charge is blunted (Zeidner & Matthews, 2017), and the student is less likely to rigidly adhere to one explanation, which can itself be very problematic (Bock et al., 2015; Riaz et al., 2013).

Treating Cognitive Rigidity

When treating cognitive rigidity, one encounters a problem almost immediately. How do you convince someone who is cognitively rigid that they are cognitively rigid? As demonstrated in the case of Steve, he was quick to blame Rose for his feeling upset, but it took much longer for him to understand his role in the altercation. Not only was Steve emotionally invested in having Rose to be the antagonist in this situation, but his investment was so great that he could not even entertain alternate explanations, including how his behavior could have provoked her. The gifted student is quick to make an analysis of a situation, but it is much harder to undo the cognitive impact of that creation (Rizeq, Flora, & Toplak, 2017). Therefore, it is important to promote, as much as possible, the development of cognitive flexibility, or the ability to fluently switch between mental sets and concepts, instead of rigidity (Müller, Gerasimova, & Ritter, 2016).

The most important skill to develop in defense against cognitive rigidity is perspective taking, or the ability to cognitively access another person's point of view on a topic (Gilman, Rice, & Carboni, 2014; Gottlieb et al., 2015). Perspective taking is considered a skill within the executive functioning suite of behaviors (Meltzer, 2014). The goal of questioning is to help individuals inhibit their tendency to accept their own initial conclusions and actively engage with other stimuli and explanations that may have been beyond their initial perception (Müller et al., 2016; Rizeq et al., 2017).

As successful cognitive flexibility includes the ability to understand and be aware of all possible alternatives simultaneously in a given situation, it is important to practice skills that allow the person to entertain these alternatives (Müller et al., 2016). It is important to note that the goal of this development is not to get the person to entertain a particular point of view, as gifted children have occasionally responded to lessons about cognitive flexibility with accusations of mind control! Rather, the goal is to develop awareness and openness to other perspectives (Gilman et al., 2014). To develop these skills, the person must be exposed to first the possibility and then the existence of different perspectives (Gilman et al., 2014). Overcoming preset notions and habits is itself demonstrative of cognitive flexibility (Moore & Malinowski, 2009). In short, to grow, individuals must first be exposed to the concept that they can grow outside of their thoughts (Gottlieb, et al., 2015).

School and social networks expose all children, including gifted children, to differences of opinion and alternate perspectives (Rimm, 2008). However, these lessons may be lost or less effective if the students are not equipped to understand them (Blair & Raver, 2015; Coleman & Cross, 2005; Eklund et al., 2015). It is important, therefore, to work with gifted students to practice the skills around perspective taking (Gilman

et al., 2014). I have found in my own clinical work that traditional, didactic lessons around perspective taking fall flat; students can understand abstractly that it is a good idea to listen to others' opinions, but lectures fail to capture the vital experiential component of this practice. Luckily, there are several activities that one can play with gifted students that are designed to enhance cognitive flexibility through developing perspective taking skills.

The first such game that I like to use in clinical work is called "Would you rather?" In this game, a student is chosen at random and the group facilitator creates an either/or question for that student. "Rose, would you rather eat only breakfast food forever or only pizza forever?" "Rose, would you rather have $1,000,000 and work in a fast food restaurant or $50,000 and be the boss of your own technology company?" The questions are usually silly and light-hearted, but the maturity level can be adjusted with the group's level and needs. The questions can also be made more complex and mature as the group demonstrates advanced skills in perspective taking.

Rose quietly produces her answer but does not reveal her opinion. The rest of the members of the group then must guess choice A or choice B (or C, D, etc.) based on what they think *Rose will choose*. This qualifier is vital. The activity isn't about seeing if the students' opinions match; it's about seeing if they can determine what Rose's answer will be. While the other students can attempt to answer by blindly guessing, you can cue them to use what they know about Rose (i.e., her likes and dislikes, what they have seen her do at school, what she brings for lunch) to inform their guesses to be more successful. After everyone has guessed, Rose reveals her answer. Everyone who guessed correctly gets praise, but I try to stay away from a point system because adding a competitive nature to this process can shift focus away from skill building. You should repeat the process with everyone in the group. The students will be surprised with how much they actually know (or can logically assume) about their classmates.

Another game that I like to use to develop perspective taking is "Alphabet Packing." You tell the group that they have the rest of the period to work together to fill a standard trunk (3 × 3 × 5) with items that they will need for a trip abroad. They must work together, going in alphabetical order (first person uses A, second, B, etc.) until they reach Z. However, each person has a rule that they must follow (i.e., Rose can only pick food, Steve cannot pick anything metallic). I will tell the students what each person's rule is up front; knowing the rules allows the other students to understand their peers' limitations, which not only is taking another perspective but also enhances empathy. Empathy is another key antidote against cognitive rigidity (Gilman et al., 2014; Moore & Malinowski, 2009). The students must also understand that all their objects, together, must fit in the trunk, which forces them to work together (note: it does not need to be an exact fit, so students only need to know relative size). The facilitator guides the conversation, keeping the tone positive and suggesting problem-solving techniques rather than accusations and teasing. In fact, one of the rules that I always add is that students cannot argue with another person's choice. This game can be repeated with different rules and sizes.

The Brain Bracket: Treating the Intersection of Cognitive Rigidity and Emotional Intensity

The "Brain Bracket" is an intervention of my own design that I was fortunate to present at the 2017 National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) Annual Conference (Zakreski, 2017). It can address the difficulties caused by the intersection of cognitive rigidity and emotional intensity. This intervention is designed to systematically walk students through the affective experience of having their opinions challenged while engaging them in discussions about the vital cognitive differences between fact and opinion. By engaging with others in conversations about differences of opinion, students are exposed to the impact of alternative perspectives, which serve to erode cognitive rigidity and lessen future emotional intensity around these issues.

This activity was created for the group or family therapy modalities, and has been used effectively with inpatient populations, substance abuse rehabilitation, people with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), and in social skills groups. For this activity, each person will receive a "Bracket," with a series of eight lines down the left-hand side of the page (see Figure 1). Each person in the group is encouraged to think of a topic that he or she feels an expert level of understanding in; the topic can be anything, but care should be taken about the appropriateness level of the topic for the group. Once all participants have a topic, everyone produces the top eight things in that category (i.e., the top eight basketball teams), and writes them down in the column. If a person cannot think of a category, a topic can be provided by the facilitator (colors, U.S. presidents, countries, restaurants, etc.) Once the participants have their lists written, they are encouraged to think (not write) about which four choices would "move on" to the next round (i.e., which is better between the color blue and red?). When each person has his or her answers mentally, the facilitator asks the group to take their individual "Brackets" and pass them to the person to their left.

At this point, there is likely to be some emotional responses, but the facilitator should be prepared to restate the rules: there is to be no interaction with other people about their lists, answer the questions to the best of your ability based on what you think, and that if they do not know the topic on the "Bracket" they received, they are to guess. These instructions should be repeated as necessary. Each person should complete the second column (with four slots) based on these rules. They are not allowed to change any previous answers, no matter what. When everyone is done, the "Brackets" are passed to the left again, and the process is repeated, this time with everyone filling out the third column (with two slots). The new person is

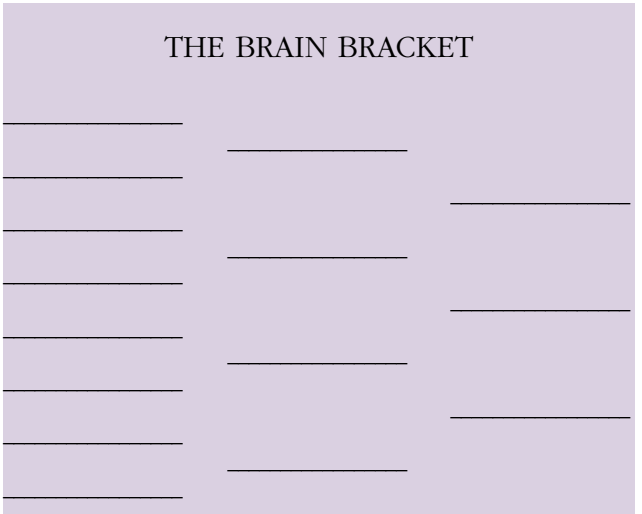

Figure 1. The Brain Bracket.

to fill out their answers based on the previously stated rules, and when they are done, the "Brackets" get passed on again to the left. The final person chooses a winner and then puts their pen down. When every "Bracket" has a winner chosen, then the facilitator can give them back to their original authors.

For processing, it is best to go in a circle and have each person do the following: (a) identify who he or she is, (b) identity the topic of expertise, (c) what he or she thinks is the best of the choices, (d) what the group chose as the best choice, and (e) how he or she feels about that choice. Everyone will be given a chance to speak about their individual "Bracket." As appropriate, it is helpful to ask the other people who filled out information on the "Bracket" to contribute their experiences: did they know about the topic? Do they agree with the person? Disagree? Why?

The take-home message of this intervention is, no matter how well a person knows a topic, there will always be people that disagree. It is important to remember that, although when one really cares about something it might feel like their thoughts are the truth, at the end of the day there are no "right answers": everything is opinion. People can disagree, and when people disagree, it is an opportunity not to yell at them or belittle them for either not knowing as much as you, but instead to offer up an alternative opinion. In the cases where a topic is presented that a person knew nothing about, that is an especially good time to process what it is like to be very smart but to not know about something. When a topic comes up that a person does not know a lot about, what can that person do?

This is an effective exercise to enhance perspective taking as an antidote to cognitive rigidity as it encourages the exploration of the feelings of expertise, opinion versus fact, and tolerating disagreement. As gifted children often struggle with understanding how others might not know as much or care as much about a topic that they do, emphasizing that differences in knowledge are opportunities to teach others (instead of belittling them) is a vital interpersonal skill to develop (Blair & Raver, 2015; Cross, 2007; Webb et al., 2007). The structured nature of this intervention promotes emotional regulation by giving everyone a chance to share thoughts and feelings, creating dialogues about topics that engendered differences of opinion (as opposed to monologs). This intervention presents an opportunity to remind the children that this is an exercise designed to challenge their beliefs, and process with them what the actual consequences (opposed to how they feel inside) of disagreement. Feelings can be validated in this manner, but also placed in a broader context, and context is key for reducing the longitudinal impact of affective intensity (Calderon et al., 2007; Fonseca, 2015).

Conclusion

"So, you don't hate me?"

After group ended, I asked Rose to stay behind for a few minutes while I debriefed the outburst with Steve. I wanted him to understand how much his actions impacted others and help him to understand that Rose hating him was not the only possible explanation for her disliking Paw Patrol. With his initial bluster aside, Steve looked melancholy and quietly agreed to speak to Rose to smooth things over. As soon as she walked into the room, Steve burst out with the above question. Rose looked shocked but not angry. "Of course not, Steve," she said, "I think you're hilarious. I just don't understand why you're making such a big deal about this kids' show." She paused. "So, why do you like it so much, anyway?" It was very profound to hear that question; by engaging with Steve around his area of interest, Rose was modeling the exact cognitive flexibility I was hoping to teach her. Before long, they were talking and laughing.

Sitting down to write this manuscript, it is amusing to consider how far Steve has come in his work at the clinic. He was able to sit down with Rose and come to an agreement of prosocial behavior that included only talking about "Paw Patrol" on his own time. He is less combative, more patient, and a significantly better listener. He still is quite opinionated and can be argumentative, but his engagements feel more like debates now and he more easily releases his affective responses. Steve checks in with the therapy team from time to time about his difficulties with other people in his life, both at home, at school, and, yes, in group, but he has taken the lessons of his unique neuropsychology to heart. He understands himself in context and understands that he is changing for the better. Steve is an example that targeted intervention can work to limit the impact of the intersection between cognitive rigidity and emotional intensity.

Gifted students are different, and those differences come with strengths and weaknesses. It is important for gifted individuals to understand that these differences exist and that the differences have a direct impact on their behavior. I have repeatedly found that this knowledge helps to put their behaviors in context for teachers, parents, friends, and themselves. When informing gifted students about their

differences, it is important to also note that these differences are not permanent; the student can learn new ways of responding with practice. If there are areas of their lives that they want to be better, then there are corresponding activities that they can do to improve those functions.

Many gifted students will want to (or be encouraged to) address their emotional intensity. They may also have difficulty with their cognitive rigidity. For gifted students, the intersection of these two traits makes for a potent combination that can disrupt learning, relationships, and self-confidence. There are strategies, both cognitive and behavioral, personal and interpersonal, that will address this combination and can improve functioning in many different domains of life. I work on these skills with gifted students every single day in my practice and I have seen real, meaningful, lasting results. Therapy for gifted individuals is often as much about skill building as much as it is about exploration; these are skills that can and should be built so our students can reach their full potential.

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Bio

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