

Psychological Loneliness in Academically Gifted Children

Malika Meherzi

Ph.D. Clinical Psychology, University of Mohammed Ben Ahmed Oran2, Faculty of Social Sciences,
Oran, Algeria

Means of investigation and therapeutic techniques for behavioral disorders Laboratory

ORCID ID: 0000-0002-1333-7062

Email: meherzi.malika@univ-oran2.dz

Malika Ben Chedda

Ph.D. Psychology, University of Mohammed Ben Ahmed Oran2, Faculty of Social Sciences, Oran,
Algeria

Research laboratory in psychology and educational sciences

ORCID ID: 0000-0002-5763-9855

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Abstract

The study focused on the topic of "Psychological Loneliness in Academically Gifted Children." An empirical study was conducted on a sample consisting of 50 academically gifted children from four primary schools (Ahmed Radjeh, Mohamed Sheikh, Colonel Amirouche, Mohamed Ziane) in the municipality of Ain Merane in Chlef Province in Algeria. A clinical study was also conducted on 4 academically gifted students who experience psychological loneliness. The following tools were employed in this study: observation, clinical interview, and the Russell's Loneliness Scale, after confirming its psychometric properties. The findings revealed that academically gifted children experience a moderate level of psychological loneliness. This psychological loneliness can be attributed to several factors, including personal reasons for the child, family circumstances, and the school environment.

Keywords: Psychological loneliness, academic excellence, family, school.

Introduction:

In recent times, societies have increasingly recognized the importance of their academically gifted children as an indication of their progress towards advancement, particularly in the face of contemporary scientific and technological challenges. Therefore, researchers have turned their attention towards understanding and addressing the needs, characteristics, and challenges of gifted individuals in order to nurture and support them. Psychological loneliness is a psychological challenge which refers to psychological isolation or introversion.

1. Problem Statement:

Childhood is a crucial and foundational stage in an individual's life, where their personality is formed. This is influenced by the family, school, and community. The child's enrollment in school and their academic excellence are fundamental and necessary steps for their success and future self-realization. Gifted individuals are characterized by certain cognitive abilities that contribute to their success. According to Clark (2008), gifted individuals possess cognitive abilities such as strong memory, rapid comprehension of concepts, speed and flexibility in thinking processes, the ability to see connections between ideas and topics, and finding solutions to problems. They also exhibit exceptional concentration, perseverance in behavior and activities, and a developmental orientation towards self and others (Ben Yakoub, 2015, p. 14).

However, the personal, behavioral, emotional, and social characteristics of gifted individuals often make them susceptible to stressful situations. They are more sensitive to social conflicts and may experience varying degrees of alienation and pressure compared to their peers, which threatens their

psychological well-being (Yousefi, 2018, p. 294). In his study on the problems of gifted students in primary education in Saudi Arabia, Al-Ghamdi (2006) found that they suffer from frustration, pressure, neglect, and a lack of familial encouragement (Al-Ajaz & Martaja, 2012, p. 339). Additionally, a study by Piechowski (1997) revealed that gifted or academically excellent students experience feelings of solitude, isolation, and introversion due to a lack of individuals who share their interests (Atar, 2012, p. 177).

A study conducted by Abu Jreis (1994) on academically gifted students in Amman, Jordan, found that emotional problems ranked first for both genders (Yousefi, 2018, p. 306). Meanwhile, a study by Mounesy (2003) on preparatory stage students in Alexandria, Egypt, revealed that creative students face issues such as isolation, introversion, daydreaming, feeling frustrated upon failure, doubt and confusion, and a lack of trust in others (Abu Hawash, 2012). Additionally, Atar (2012) found that emotional and relational problems ranked third and fourth, respectively, among the issues faced by academically gifted students in secondary schools in Tlemcen, Algeria (Atar, 2012, p. 192).

Indeed, some studies indicate that 20% to 25% of academically gifted students experience adaptive difficulties, including social isolation, bullying by older students, unique play interests, a lack of peers who share their interests, reliance on parents as companions, a poor school climate, high expectations from others, and awareness of parental concerns towards them (Ben Yakoub, 2015, p. 18).

Accordingly, we formulate the following research questions:

1. What is the level of psychological loneliness among academically gifted children?
2. What are the factors that contribute to the psychological loneliness experienced by academically gifted children?

2. Study Hypotheses:

Based on the study's research questions, the following hypotheses were formulated:

1. Academically gifted students experience a moderate level of psychological loneliness.
2. The psychological loneliness experienced by gifted children is attributed to familial factors.

3. The Theoretical Framework of the Study:

Firstly, Academic Excellence: Some researchers have defined "gifted" as students who possess academic abilities that place them significantly above the average level of their age group. On the other hand, "talented" refers to students who exhibit exceptional abilities in areas such as art, music, or sports that are significantly above the appropriate average level for their age. Others view "giftedness" as the actual or potential ability of a student in one or more areas considered by teachers or parents to be beyond the scope of typical student abilities. "Talent", on the other hand, is seen as outstanding performance in one or more fields of activity resulting from the student's learning experiences. These definitions reflect the distinction between ability and performance by recognizing the importance of innate abilities while emphasizing the significant impact of the environment on the development or inhibition of a person's talents and abilities (Hamed, Ghanem, Aysam, 2014, p. 18).

Havighurst defines the academically gifted individual as someone who demonstrates superior performance in socially accepted domains. The [National Association for the Study of Education](#) defines academically gifted as individuals who have achieved outstanding or exceptional performance in any field. Bentley perceives academically gifted individuals as those who possess advanced abilities in studying, while "Atiya Hanna" views them as children who stand out from their peers, surpassing them in their studies and obtaining higher grades. They are typically characterized by higher intelligence and faster learning abilities than their peers (Sayed Sulaiman, Ghazi, 2001, p. 12).

Academically gifted individuals exhibit a range of cognitive, academic, emotional, affective, and social characteristics. Among their most important traits, they are often more intelligent and mature compared to their chronological age. Their behaviors tend to align with those older than them. Additionally, they are characterized by calmness, emotional stability, self-reliance, and a positive self-concept. They possess high levels of moral maturity, are open to society, inclined to discuss and critique reality, and have a tendency to take on leadership roles and influence others. Moreover, they display other positive characteristics that deviate from the average of their typical peers when provided

with suitable conditions (Madi, 2006, p. 43). Therefore, academically gifted children experience a range of problems despite their positive traits, and researchers categorize these problems as follows:

1. Internal Problems: These include high sensitivity towards oneself and one's behaviors, having multiple interests, excessive perfectionism, and physical issues such as disabilities.
2. External Problems: These can be further divided into the following categories:
 - a. Family-related problems: These include high parental expectations, parents projecting their unrealized ambitions onto the child, issues with siblings.
 - b. Peer-related problems: These encompass rejection, bullying, lack of shared interests, jealousy, annoyance, and mockery.
 - c. Problems related to educational systems: These involve teacher behaviors and evaluation methods. (Hamed, 2017, pp. 259-264).

The academically gifted child in elementary school (4th and 5th grades) is defined procedurally as a student who obtains a grade average exceeding 08/10 in the first trimester of the school year 2018/2019, equivalent to 80%.

Secondly, Psychological Loneliness: which is defined by Pelpau and Perlman (1981) as an unpleasant experience resulting from a disturbance in the individual's social relationship network, both quantitatively and qualitatively. This disturbance can manifest quantitatively as a lack of a sufficient number of friends, or qualitatively as a deficiency in affection and closeness with others (Abu Asaad, 2011, p. 148). Weiss (1973) distinguished between two forms of psychological loneliness:

1. Emotional loneliness: It arises from a deficiency or inadequacy in bonds of affection or warmth with significant individuals in the child's life. This leads to feelings of sadness, fear, unease, emptiness, anxiety, and isolation.
2. Social loneliness: It stems from a lack of social relationship network that fails to satisfy the individual, resulting in a loss of self-confidence accompanied by feelings of boredom, frustration, despair, and marginalization (Al-Shaboun, Al-Ahmad, 2013, p. 26).

Shuqair defined psychological loneliness as an abnormal state accompanied by symptoms of tension, distress, low self-esteem, lack of respect for others, and an inability to achieve emotional and social connection with others. On the other hand, Dessouki described it as an individual's sense of a psychological gap that separates them from the people around them due to a lack of opportunities to engage in meaningful relationships. This leads to a feeling of non-acceptance, rejection, and neglect by others despite being surrounded by them (Bouaziz, 2013, p. 26).

Both Sullivan and Weiss (Sullivan, 1953; Weiss, p. 1973) suggest that the experience of psychological loneliness does not become apparent until the pre-adolescent stage. However, several studies have demonstrated that preschool children also experience feelings of psychological loneliness and dissatisfaction with their social lives. Psychological loneliness in children has been associated with negative emotions and unfulfilled relational needs, such as a lack of peers and social support (Al-Shaboun, Al-Ahmad, 2013, p. 25).

Operationally, psychological loneliness is defined by the score obtained by academically gifted children on Russell's Loneliness Scale.

4. Methodological Procedures of the Study:

4.1. Research Design:

This study employed a descriptive and clinical approach. The descriptive method was used to identify the level of psychological loneliness among academically gifted children, while the clinical method was used to explore the causes of psychological loneliness in this group.

4.2. Research Instruments:

The following instruments were used in this study:

4.2.1. Structured Interview:

In this study, a structured interview was utilized. An interview guide was prepared, covering the following dimensions: the child's personal information, family life, and school life.

4.2.2. Observation:

Free observation was employed during the interview with academically gifted children. Behaviors indicating psychological loneliness were recorded and noted.

4.2.3. Psychological Loneliness Scale:

4.2.3.1. Scale Description:

This scale was developed by Russell (1996) and translated by Majdi Mohammad Dessouki. The scale consists of 20 statements to which respondents provide answers based on four alternatives: Never/Rarely/Sometimes/Always. A higher score indicates a higher level of psychological loneliness. In this study, this scale was used due to its ease of language, simplicity of statements, and suitability for elementary school children. Additionally, this scale has been used in previous studies involving children.

4.2.3.2. Psychometric Properties of the Scale:

This scale was administered to a sample consisting of 30 students in the fifth grade at Al-Shuhada Ahmed Radjeh School in Chlef Province. The scale was found to possess the following psychometric properties:

• Validity:

Discriminant validity of the scale was assessed using the "Contrast Group" method, as shown in the following table:

Table (01): Differences in the level of psychological loneliness between the high and low groups.

Variables	Groups		Arithmetic mean	Standard deviation	Degree of freedom	T	Significance level
Psychological Loneliness	Highest	n=8	69.13	1.80	14	50.55	function at 0.01
	Lowest	n=8	29.88	1.24			

We observe from the table that there are statistically significant differences in the level of psychological loneliness between the group of children with high psychological loneliness and the group of children with low psychological loneliness. This indicates that the scale possesses discriminant validity.

• Reliability:

The reliability of the scale was assessed using the Cronbach's alpha method, and it was found that the scale is reliable, with a reliability coefficient of 0.97.

4.3. Study Sample Specifications:

The statistical study was conducted on a sample of 50 academically gifted students from the following schools in Ain Merane, Chlef Province: Ahmed Radjeh, Mohamed El Sheikh, Colonel Amirouche, and Mohamed Ziane. Their ages ranged from 9 to 11 years old. They had the following specifications:

Table (02): Statistical Study Sample Specifications.

Variables		Duplicate	%
Sex	Male	23	46
	Females	27	54
Section	04 Primary	25	50
	05 Primary	25	50
Rate	From 08 to 09	15	30
	Equal to or greater than 09	35	70

The clinical study was conducted on a group consisting of 4 academically gifted students, comprising 2 boys and 2 girls, who experience high levels of psychological loneliness. Their characteristics are as follows:

Table (03): Clinical Study Sample Specifications

Figure	Sex	Age	Section	Rate	Number of brothers	Rank among brothers	Father's profession	Mother's profession
01	Female	11	5 Primary	09	/	The only one	Doctor	Professor
02	Female	10	5 Primary	09	2	Minor	Professor	Teacher
03	Male	11	5 Primary	09	2	The Biggest	Police	Employee

							officer	
04	Male	11	5 Primary	09	3	The youngest	Employee	Housewife

5. Presentation and discussion of the study results:

5.1. Presentation and discussion of the results of the first hypothesis test:

This hypothesis states that "academically gifted students experience a moderate level of psychological loneliness". To test this hypothesis, the mean, theoretical mean, and standard deviation were calculated, and the results were as follows:

Table (04): The level of psychological loneliness among academically gifted children.

Variables	Arithmetic mean	Theoretical average	Standard deviation
Psychological Loneliness	46.74	40	16.07

From the table, we observe that academically gifted children experience a level of psychological loneliness within the range of the average. This is evident from the close proximity between the mean and theoretical mean values. Therefore, we can conclude that the first hypothesis has been supported, indicating that academically gifted students indeed experience a moderate level of psychological loneliness.

The literature indicates that psychological loneliness begins in childhood when the individual's need for social connections emerges, influencing their experiences and development. Analytically, the roots of psychological loneliness can be traced back to the frustration of primary needs during childhood. Sullivan (1953) views psychological loneliness as a reaction of the child when their need for human closeness is frustrated, leading to a lack of affection, connection with others, and participation in their personal interests (Al-Shaboon, Al-Ahmed, 2013, p. 24). Similarly, Sanda, Howard, and Hamilton (1995) argue that academically gifted individuals fail to develop social skills and relationships due to the absence of peers at the same level who can share their interests, inclinations, and needs, resulting in feelings of loneliness and isolation. As mental maturity increases, the gap between them and their peers widens, making them less accepted and causing discomfort and dissonance, ultimately leading to further solitude and withdrawal (Atar, 2012, p. 183)."

5.2. Presentation and discussion of the results of the second hypothesis test:

This hypothesis states that "psychological loneliness in academically gifted children is attributed to family factors". To test this hypothesis, a clinical study was conducted on 4 academically gifted students who experience a high level of psychological loneliness. The cases were as follows:

- **Case 1:** Female, 11 years old. She is the only daughter in a financially well-off family. Her father is a doctor, and her mother is a teacher. She has achieved a GPA of 9/10. She is characterized by her calm demeanor and tendency to be alone, following her parents' advice. She believes that making friends or playing with classmates is a waste of time and will distract her from her studies. There are no shared interests between her and her peers. In her free time, she focuses on memorizing as many French vocabulary words as possible to improve her French language skills, which often leads to mockery from her classmates. She strives to become a doctor and considers her parents to be her only friends, believing that she has no need for additional friendships. This case obtained a high score on the psychological loneliness scale (73).
- **Case 2:** Female, 10 years old. She holds the youngest position among her siblings (2 males). Both of her parents work in the education sector. She has achieved a GPA of 9/10. Despite her academic excellence, she is characterized by extreme shyness, quietness, and isolation from her peers. Her isolation stems from her classmates' lack of interest in forming friendships with her, as she is the daughter of a teacher in the same school. Moreover, they mock her and attribute her academic success and praise from the teacher to her mother's connections within the school. Her parents interact with her strictly, pushing her to excel like her older siblings. Regarding her relationship with her siblings, it is superficial, as each of them spends their time

between private lessons and sports activities. This case obtained a high score on the psychological loneliness scale (76).

- **Case 3:** Male, 11 years old. He is considered the oldest child in the family, having a younger brother and sister. His father works as a police officer, and his mother is an employee. He has achieved a GPA of 9/10. He is characterized by seriousness and behaving like an adult. His relationships with his peers are limited to giving them instructions, as he takes on a leadership role in any group activity he is involved in. He attributes the scarcity of his friendships to a lack of time, as he dedicates his time to studying and training in judo. Additionally, he takes care of his younger sister (who is in primary school) under the guidance of his parents. Consequently, he receives strict parental treatment, being the oldest among his siblings, in order to shoulder responsibility and persist in achieving success in education and sports. This case obtained a high score on the psychological loneliness scale (68).
- **Case 4:** Male, 11 years old. He is considered the youngest brother among three sisters. His father works as an employee, while his mother is a housewife. He has achieved a GPA of 9/10. The case is characterized by a weak physical structure that prevents him from participating in physical activities with his peers. He prefers games that rely on intelligence and minimal physical effort, spending his free time on the computer at home. He is quiet, tends to withdraw, and exhibits fear. He lives in a strict family environment where his parents' protection is excessive, not allowing him to leave the house alone. This case obtained a high score on the psychological loneliness scale (80).

And the child's sense of psychological loneliness can be attributed to various factors. External factors include conflicts within the family, exposure to punishment and harsh treatment, favoring other siblings over him/her, and others. School-related factors include peer rejection, mockery, and ridicule, as well as the child's perception of being unloved or less favored by classmates or teachers. Additionally, the child's personal characteristics, such as shyness, anxiety, and other traits that hinder the formation of meaningful friendships, contribute to their sense of isolation (Al-Shaboun, Al-Ahmad, 2013, p. 27). Regarding the case studies, the causes of psychological loneliness can be summarized as follows:

Personal factors: They can be summarized as follows:

- **Feeling of superiority:** In the case studies, the exceptional academic performance of the children was one of the most significant factors. According to Cornel, Callahan, and Lloyd (1991), the feeling of being different among the gifted and talented individuals leads to a lack of adaptability, feelings of frustration, and lack of harmony. Consequently, they experience a sense of alienation due to differences in interests, talents, and characteristics. They may develop a keen interest in profound issues and problems related to values, ethics, justice, environmental disasters, and other concerns that their ordinary peers do not share. As a result of this distinction, these high achievers and gifted individuals often face mockery and negative emotions, which further contributes to their sense of loneliness, isolation, and introversion due to a lack of individuals who share their interests (Atar, 2012, p. 182).
- **Gap between intellectual and emotional growth:** This was evident in the first and third cases, where studies have shown that gifted individuals often struggle with a lack of emotional maturity that corresponds to their chronological age, leading to potential psychological and social challenges (Atar, 2012, p. 179). Intellectual growth tends to progress at a faster pace than emotional growth, causing gifted individuals to encounter difficulties in dealing with emotional, social, or personal concepts that surpass their capacity. This can result in their emotional judgment being influenced by their age, leading to pressure and an inability to simultaneously navigate these two domains in their relationships with others. As a consequence, they may experience isolation and find it challenging to integrate with their peers, as they are not understood by them, prompting them to seek companionship with older individuals (Ben Yakoub, 2015, p. 19).
- **Child's birth order within the family:** Salkind suggests that the positions of children within a family provide different opportunities for interaction. The first-born child receives higher

levels of parental attention and assumes a role as a disciplinarian to their siblings, which enriches their experiences, knowledge, and practices, consequently enhancing their creative abilities. This is evident in the third case study (Salkind, Year). On the other hand, foreign studies have shown that middle children, youngest children (second and fourth cases), and only children (first case) tend to be more creative than first-born children (El-Sharbini & Saadik, 2006, p. 187).

Family and school factors: They can be summarized as follows:

- **Pressures:** Gifted students often experience pressures stemming from their own aspirations, expectations from family members, teachers, and peers. They may face disapproval from some teachers and encounter criticism and social isolation from their peers (Ben Yakoub, 2015, p. 10). The first case study experiences internal pressures driven by her desire to become a doctor. The second and third cases are under familial pressures due to parental expectations. Meanwhile, the fourth case, especially, faces pressures from peers. A study by Kochenderfer and Ladd (1996) confirmed the association between psychological distress and being victimized by peers, leading to fear, loss of confidence, and subsequent withdrawal (Ashbaon, Al-Ahmad, 2013, p. 27).
- **Teacher's behavior towards the child:** The behavior of teachers towards gifted students plays a crucial role. Teachers aim to understand the child, their abilities, skills, interests, desires, and aspirations, and utilize them to bring out the best in the child. Good teacher-student relationships are essential for the development and success of gifted students in all four cases. A study by Amabile found a significant correlation between students' performance and their teachers' expectations, which relied on encouraging them to explore, discover, question, challenge, and accept their ideas (El-Sharbini & Saadik, 2006, p. 169). However, there are instances where teachers can hinder the talents of gifted students due to their poor handling. Some studies in the West have shown that teachers were unable to unleash the innovative and creative abilities of their students because they lacked creative thinking skills themselves (Ben Ziane, 2017, p. 6). Tannenbaum (2003) also argues that teachers play a significant role in influencing the gifted, as they may respond to their questions with ridicule or label them in ways that make other students laugh at them, leading to feelings of embarrassment (Atar, 2012, p. 176). Paradoxically, the positive treatment of the case study children by their teachers has resulted in negative behaviors from their peers, such as jealousy and mockery (first, second, and fourth cases), bullying (fourth case), and isolation (all cases). Ghufayli (1990), in her study on identifying the psychological needs and problems of intellectually gifted female students in fifth and sixth grades in Saudi Arabia, pointed out these negative behaviors. She found that gifted students suffer from fear of exams, jealousy from their peers, lack of affection, and conflicts with their siblings within the family (Atar, 2012, p. 176).
- **Education system:** All four cases experience boredom during their studies due to the easeiness of the lessons for them. Alencar points out that the education system in many countries can hinder or suppress the growth of children's potential, including their creative abilities. This is due to the nature of the educational environment or context, which emphasizes obedience, conformity, and negativity in student interaction (El-Sharbini & Saadik, 2006, p. 167).
- **Family dynamics:** In terms of family factors, the following aspects can be identified:
 - **Role of parents:** Bee emphasizes the role of parents in nurturing and developing the creative personality of a child. Lewis and Cropley argue that the close relationship between the child and their parents plays a vital role in the development of their creative abilities. Moderate parenting and providing appropriate reinforcement help build children's self-confidence, which reflects on the growth of their creative abilities. Harrison found positive relationships between children's level of creative thinking and the cultural interests expressed by parents within the family (El-Sharbini & Saadik, 2006, p. 154).

This is evident in the four cases, as they receive encouragement and support from their parents to succeed in their lives.

- **Parent's treatment of the child:** The parental treatment style varies among the cases. The first case lives in a family environment based on trust and friendship between her and her parents. A study conducted by Rotenberg and McDonald in England found a negative correlation between self-isolation and trust in others in general (Ashbyan, Al-Ahmad, 2013, p. 37). As for the remaining cases, they live in a family environment where parents rely on comparing their children either within the same family or with other children. Studies indicate that this has a negative impact on children and may lead them to feelings of failure and inadequacy compared to others (Ben Ziane, 2017, p. 3). In addition to strictness and harshness in parenting, Bowlby and attachment theory proponents argue that neglect and harsh treatment experienced by a child from their parents in early childhood do not help them establish a secure attachment relationship with their parents. This can later lead to social relationship problems, resulting in their negativity, withdrawal from others, and a sense of psychological isolation (Ashbyan, Al-Ahmad, 2013, p. 24). The parental expectations towards the four cases also create pressure on them. Rogers suggests that the cause of psychological isolation is the societal pressures placed on individuals, which make them behave in specific socially agreed-upon ways. As a result, individuals fulfill their expected roles in society without precision or attention, leading to a sense of emptiness (Bouaziz, 2013, p. 34).
- **Working Parents:** What distinguishes families in which both parents work is that the child's supervision becomes inconsistent, and thus these parents cannot understand their child well because they do not spend much time with them (Ben Ziane, 2017, p. 7). It is worth noting that the majority of the study cases (3 out of 4) come from families where both parents work.

Based on the clinical study results, it can be said that the second hypothesis was not fulfilled.

Conclusion and Recommendations:

The study focused on the topic of "Psychological Loneliness in Academically Gifted Children". Through statistical analysis and clinical study with academically gifted children in primary schools in the Chlef Province, it was found that academically gifted children experience a moderate level of psychological loneliness. The reasons for this psychological loneliness are attributed to personal factors in the child (feeling of superiority, gap between intellectual and emotional growth, family hierarchy, shyness, and fear), family factors (family pressures, parental employment, parenting style), and school factors (academic pressures, teacher behavior, educational system). Based on these results, the following recommendations are proposed:

- Activate the role of school guidance and career counselors to address the issues of academically gifted students.
- Incorporate "Giftedness and Creativity Psychology" in teacher training programs to better manage classrooms in the presence of gifted and talented students.
- Implement the "Academic Acceleration" system in educational institutions by placing academically gifted students in classes that match their intellectual abilities.
- Activate the role of "Parent-Teacher Associations" as a link between educational institutions and the families of gifted students to better harness and develop their abilities.

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