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The Difference of Coping Mechanisms between Gifted Female and Gifted Male Young Adults During the September–November 2024 Crisis in Lebanon

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Abstract

This study investigated the coping mechanisms of female and male gifted adolescents and young adults in Lebanon during the period of September 2024 to November 2024. Specifically, it examined how the two genders differed in the ways they processed and coped with the emotional and cognitive influences of the crisis. The study focused on eight gifted young adults (four females and four males) between the ages of 17 and 24 who were forced to be displaced during the aforementioned period. Using narrative inquiry, the study explored participants lived experiences and identified gendered coping patterns. Findings suggest that gifted males tended to rely on logical reframing, emotional suppression, and delayed processing, with a notable decline in academic motivation and engagement. Gifted females more frequently expressed emotions openly, used journaling and music as coping outlets, and sought meaning through relational reflection and community involvement, while attempting to sustain academic continuity despite reduced productivity. Across both groups, family proximity and spiritual anchoring functioned as shared protective resources. The study concludes that mentors, parents, and caregivers should avoid one-size-fits-all expectations of coping, and should instead provide safe, choice-based, and relationally attuned spaces that legitimize diverse coping styles while protecting gifted youth's educational pathways and purposeful engagement.

Keywords: intellectually gifted, young adults, displacement, war and crisis, coping, gender, narrative inquiry, Lebanon

Introduction

Armed conflict and political instability have repeatedly disrupted the developmental landscape of young people in Lebanon. The September 2024 escalation and the extended insecurity that followed through November 2024 did not only produce material loss and displacement; it also created a persistent psychological climate characterized by fear, uncertainty, and the collapse of routine. In Lebanon, where education is often perceived as both a pathway of social mobility and a core site of identity investment, the interruption of schooling and university life becomes more than a logistical inconvenience—it becomes a rupture in the sense of continuity, future, and self. Public reports during the period emphasized the psychological burden carried by children and youth, including fear responses, sleep disturbance, and anxiety, alongside widespread disruption of schooling and access to services (UNICEF, 2024, 2025). UNICEF (2024) reported that, during this period, over 1,100 children were injured and more than 160 were killed, alongside widespread displacement and disruption to services.

Although the general impact of war on youth has been widely documented, the experiences of intellectually gifted adolescents and young adults remain underexplored, particularly in Lebanon. This gap matters because giftedness is not merely an index of cognitive ability; it is frequently accompanied by intensities in emotional responsiveness, heightened moral sensitivity, and a deep awareness of injustice qualities that can amplify both vulnerability and meaning-making in crisis (Piechowski, 2006; Pfeiffer, 2013). Gifted youth may also experience identity enmeshment with academic performance and future achievement, which renders educational disruption uniquely destabilizing. At the same time, gifted adolescents may mobilize advanced cognitive resources, such as reframing, reflective reasoning, and problem-solving—to endure adversity (Shaunessy & Suldo, 2010).

The present study is positioned within this gap. It examines how gifted female and gifted male young adults in Lebanon processed and coped with the September–November 2024 crisis, and it foregrounds gendered patterns that emerged in both emotional expression and cognitive framing. Rather than treating coping as a uniform outcome, this study approaches coping as a lived, relational, and storied process that becomes visible in the narratives young people talk about themselves, their families, their education, and their future.

Purpose, Research Questions, and Thesis Statement

The purpose of this study is to investigate the differences be-

tween gifted females and gifted males in (a) emotional and cognitive processing of war-related experiences and (b) coping strategies employed during the September–November 2024 crisis in Lebanon. It also aims to translate the findings into practical implications for mentors, parents, and caregivers supporting gifted adolescents and young adults in crisis contexts.

The study is guided by three research questions:

1. How did gifted females and gifted males differ in their cognitive and emotional processing of war-related experiences?
2. What coping strategies did gifted females and gifted males employ in response to the crisis?
3. How can these findings enhance the abilities of mentors, parents, and caregivers in supporting gifted adolescents?

This paper advances the thesis that, during prolonged crisis and displacement, gifted males and gifted females demonstrate distinct yet overlapping coping repertoires shaped by gendered norms of emotional expression and by the cognitive–emotional intensities associated with giftedness; therefore, support systems must provide safe, choice-based, and relationally attuned spaces that legitimize diverse coping pathways while protecting educational continuity and purposeful engagement.

Literature Review

War, Displacement, and Developmental Disruption

Research across conflict-affected settings has shown that exposure to armed conflict is associated with trauma-related symptoms, anxiety, and disrupted developmental trajectories, particularly when displacement, loss of routine, and chronic uncertainty persist (Betancourt et al., 2020; Song & Shaheen, 2013). In Lebanon, recurrent cycles of escalation have repeatedly destabilized the developmental conditions young people need for psychological security: predictable routines, stable schooling, and protected time. The interruption of education is especially consequential during adolescence and emerging adulthood, when developmental tasks include identity consolidation, future planning, and academic-to-career transition (Masten & Narayan, 2012). When education becomes fragmented by displacement and institutional disruption, young people may experience not only learning loss, but also an erosion of future orientation and belonging (Smith, 2021).

Giftedness Under Adversity: Intensities, Sensitivities, and Moral Awareness

Gifted education scholarship has long emphasized that intellectually gifted learners often show asynchronous development: cognitive advancement coexisting with emotional vulnerabilities (Gross, 2002; Neihart, 1999). Gifted youth may display heightened sensitivities and intensities—frequently described through overexcitability theory—that include emotional depth, aesthetic responsiveness, and moral awareness (Dabrowski, 1972; Piechowski, 2006). In times of war, these traits can function in two directions. On one hand, heightened sensitivity and moral intensity may intensify anxiety, intrusive worry, existential distress, and a painful awareness of injustice. On the other hand, the same cognitive complexity and moral awareness can support reflective meaning-making, prosocial commitment, and resilience pathways that depend on agency and purpose (Howard, 2019; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

Coping as Appraisal, Meaning-Making, and Strategy Repertoire
The transactional model of stress and coping conceptualizes coping as an appraisal-based process: individuals interpret events, evaluate available resources, and select strategies to regulate distress and restore functioning (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Coping is often discussed as problem-focused (aimed at changing circumstances) and emotion-focused (aimed at regulating emotional experience). In prolonged crises where control is limited, coping tends to emphasize emotional regulation, meaning-making, and the conservation of resources (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2000).

Within gifted populations, coping has been shown to be shaped by achievement contexts, perfectionism pressures, and identity investment in academic performance. Intellectually gifted students in rigorous programs have reported using cognitive reframing, planning, and social support to manage stress, while also describing emotional exhaustion and the need to protect self-worth (Shaunessy & Suldo, 2010; Helsper et al., 2025). During war and displacement, these patterns may intensify: gifted youth may attempt to preserve academic identity as a form of stability, while simultaneously struggling with motivation when the future feels suspended.

Why Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry provides a methodological framework that is particularly suited to exploring coping during war because it treats experience as storied, relational, and situated across time, relationships, and place (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Caine et al., 2013). In displacement contexts, notions such as "home," "school," "future," and "self" are re-narrated. Narrative inquiry allows researchers to trace these re-narrations and to understand coping not only as a list of behaviors but as a meaning-making process that unfolds through personal and social storytelling.

Gap in the Literature

While the psychosocial impacts of war on youth are well documented, and while gifted education scholarship has explored stress and coping in academic contexts, there remains limited empirical work that examines gifted adolescents' coping within active conflict and displacement, particularly through a gender-comparative lens in Lebanon (Yamin, 2023). This study addresses this gap by identifying gendered patterns in coping among gifted young adults during the September–November 2024 crisis, and by translating those patterns into guidance for mentors, parents, and caregivers.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research design using narrative inquiry. Narrative inquiry was selected because it enables a close examination of lived experience as it unfolds across time, relationships, and places, and because it privileges participants' meaning-making through storytelling (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Caine et al., 2013). The design was conceptually informed by the transactional model of stress and coping (Lazarus

& Folkman, 1984), which provided an interpretive lens for understanding appraisal and strategy use during crisis.

Participants and Context

The study focused on eight gifted young adults (N = 8), four females and four males, aged 17–24, who experienced displacement during the September–November 2024 crisis in Lebanon. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure gender representation and to align with the study's definition of giftedness. For this study, "gifted" referred to documented intellectual or academic exceptionalities (e.g., formal cognitive assessment results were available, exceptional academic attainment, or evidence of sustained high achievement in demanding programs). All participants experienced direct disruption to schooling or university study and reported varying degrees of relocation, housing instability, and routine collapse.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured narrative interviews. Interview prompts were designed to elicit storied accounts and invited participants to describe: (a) pre-crisis routines and aspirations; (b) moments of escalation and displacement; (c) emotional and cognitive reactions; (d) coping actions and supports; and (e) perceived changes in identity, relationships, and educational engagement. Consistent with narrative inquiry principles, follow-up prompts were used to deepen temporality ("how did this evolve across weeks?"), sociality ("who was with you and how did that shape you?"), and place ("what did it mean to leave, arrive, and return?"). Interviews were conducted in a trauma-sensitive manner: participants were reminded that they could pause, skip questions, or discontinue at any time. Interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim. Pseudonyms were assigned, and identifying details were removed during transcription.

Interview language and narrative interpretation. Interviews were conducted primarily in English, given participants' comfort in using it to describe academic life and personal experience. Participants were also free to draw on Lebanese Arabic for culturally specific terms or emotionally precise expressions; when this occurred, the interviewer invited immediate clarification to preserve intended meaning in the transcript. Because narrative inquiry attends closely to the texture of participants' wording, analysis prioritized participants' own phrasing during restorying and theme development, and interpretations were made with attention to how language choice can shape the expression of emotion, agency, and moral meaning.

Data Analysis

Analysis proceeded in four iterative phases

Phase 1: Within-Case Narrative Restorying. Each interview transcript was first treated as a field text that was reworked into a coherent narrative account. The purpose of this phase was to preserve sequence, turning points, and the participant's own interpretive language while attending to shifts in emotion, cognition, and identity across time.

Phase 2: Inductive Coding and Theme Development. Transcripts were then coded inductively to identify recurring expressions related to emotional processing, cognitive framing, coping actions, and perceived impacts. Codes were clustered into tentative themes, and a working codebook was refined across analysis cycles.

Phase 3: Gender-Comparative Synthesis. Themes were compared across gender groups to identify patterns of convergence and divergence, while remaining attentive to within-group variation. This synthesis emphasized how coping strategies were embedded in gendered norms of emotional expression and responsibility.

Phase 4: Interpretive Linking to Conceptual Lens. Themes were interpreted through the transactional model of coping, distinguishing between coping oriented toward emotional regulation, meaning-making, and restoration of functioning.

AI-Supported Analytic Memoing

To strengthen analytic reflexivity and reduce blind spots, the researchers employed an AI-assisted analytic memo as a supplementary step. Using anonymized transcripts, a structured prompt was developed to generate a preliminary thematic synthesis (e.g., recurring emotions, temporal patterns, coping strategies, and relational dynamics). The resulting memo was then compared against human coding to (a) cross-check theme visibility, (b) flag possible under-attended patterns (such as "temporal rupture" language), and (c) refine theme definitions. Importantly, AI outputs did not replace analytic decisions; rather, they served as an additional reflective surface that supported the researchers' interpretive discipline and auditability.

Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

Trustworthiness was supported through an audit trail documenting coding decisions and theme revisions, reflexive memoing, and peer debriefing. Where feasible, participants were offered a brief summary of their narrative account for resonance checking, without pressuring them to revisit distressing detail. Ethical relationality was prioritized throughout: confidentiality, emotional safety, and the right to withdraw were treated as central. Informed consent procedures were completed prior to interviews, and the interview approach was designed to minimize harm through participant control and supportive pacing.

Findings

The findings are organized into (a) shared experiences across participants and (b) gendered patterns in processing and coping.

Shared Core Experiences: Fear, Routine Collapse, and Identity Strain

Across both male and female participants, the crisis was narrated as a period marked by constant fear, disrupted routines, and a sense of developmental interruption. Participants described heightened vigilance, fragmented sleep, and persistent exposure to alarming news. Well-structured academic routines were replaced by unpredictable schedules, undermining the stability that many gifted youths rely on for performance and self-regulation. Several participants described feeling that they were "paused" in time—unable to plan, unable to progress, and unsure how to resume.

Emotional Processing: Detachment and Suppression versus Expression and Emotional Containment

A salient gendered pattern appeared in emotional processing. Gifted male participants frequently narrated an initial reaction of shock and confusion that shifted into emotional detachment or suppression. Detachment was described not as absence of feeling but as functional regulation: keeping emotions "outside" in order to remain operational for family responsibilities and immediate decisions. Males often reported delayed emotional processing, suggesting that distress was postponed until environments felt safer.

Gifted female participants, in contrast, described more open emotional expression. Crying, journaling, and music were narrated as primary outlets, and emotional responses were often linked to empathic resonance with community suffering. At the same time, females also described emotional containment strategies, including limiting news exposure and carving quiet personal space, indicating that open expression coexisted with deliberate self-protection.

Cognitive Processing: Timeline Fractures and Logical Reframing

Cognitive processing displayed notable contours. Several gifted male participants framed the crisis as a rupture in narrative continuity, describing the war period as a "different timeline" or a separate chapter detached from the pre-crisis self. This temporal framing functioned as compartmentalization: a way to preserve a sense of normal identity by isolating traumatic experience in a distinct mental compartment. Males also relied on logical reframing and spiritual reflection to regain coherence, often expressing a need to "make sense" of events through structured reasoning.

Female participants also engaged in meaning-making, yet their narratives more frequently integrated emotion and cognition rather than separating them. Their cognitive framing was relational and responsibility-oriented, often centered on family members, displaced communities, and peers. Several described seeking meaning through purposeful action—small routines, study commitments, or community involvement—suggesting that meaning-making was enacted as practice rather than only reflection.

Coping Strategies: Divergent Repertoires, Shared Anchors

Both genders drew on shared anchors: family proximity, spiritual belief or reflection, and the attempt to preserve some educational continuity. However, the dominant coping repertoires diverged.

Gifted male participants leaned toward logical reframing, suppression, and delayed emotional processing. Suppression was often narrated as responsibility ("I cannot collapse now"), and it was sometimes accompanied by academic disengagement and reduced motivation. Several males described disinterest in study during the crisis, not because they rejected education, but because the future felt temporarily irrelevant.

Gifted female participants emphasized emotional expression (journaling, crying, music) and relational coping (seeking conversation, solidarity, and social support). Many described community involvement—volunteering, NGO-related engagement, or informal assistance to displaced people—as a way to regain agency. Females also demonstrated a more consistent effort to maintain educational engagement, though they described reduced productivity and the need for flexibility.

Family and Social Ecology: Support and Burden

Family emerged as both protective factor and stressor. Closeness offered psychological security, yet participants also described tension around evacuation decisions, exposure to news, and the emotional labor of maintaining family cohesion. Some participants felt implicitly assigned the role of the "strong one," carrying responsibility that intensified internal stress. Peer relationships and academic communities were disrupted by displacement, and several participants described isolation even when surrounded by others.

Discussion

The findings suggest that coping among gifted young adults during war is complex, paradoxical, and deeply shaped by both giftedness-related intensities and gendered norms of emotional expression. Emotional suppression among males may appear externally as resilience, yet it can also function as a coping mask that delays processing and increases later vulnerability. Conversely, open emotional expression among females may appear as fragility to observers, yet it often functioned as deliberate regulation that enabled continued functioning and relational connection.

Interpreted through the transactional model of coping, the narratives reflect an intensified reliance on emotion-focused coping strategies under conditions where external control is minimal (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Both genders used emotional regulation, meaning-making, and spiritual anchoring; the difference resided in how these were expressed and narrated. Males often enacted emotion-focused coping through cognitive compartmentalization and suppression, while females enacted it through expression, relational engagement, and prosocial action. These patterns should not be read as fixed or essentialized; rather, they illustrate how social expectations about emotional expression can shape the visibility and language of coping.

The concept of temporal rupture is particularly significant. When participants describe a crisis as a "different timeline," they signal an interruption in developmental continuity. For gifted learners whose identities are often tied to academic progression and future planning, this rupture may be especially destabilizing. Yet it may also serve as a protective narrative strategy that enables psychological survival in the present by preserving the imagination of a return.

Finally, the findings resonate with scholarship emphasizing that gifted youth's heightened sensitivities can amplify both risk and resilience (Piechowski, 2006; Pfeiffer, 2013). Prosocial engagement and purpose-driven action appear as important resilience pathways, particularly when supported rather than demanded. These insights point to the need for supports that are simultane-

ously trauma-informed and gifted-responsive.

Implications for Mentors, Parents, and Caregivers

Three implications are emphasized.

First, educational continuity should be treated as both an academic and psychosocial intervention. For gifted youth, disruption of enriched learning opportunities can intensify identity loss and distress. Schools and universities should provide flexible learning pathways—adaptive deadlines, asynchronous access, alternative assessments—while embedding trauma-sensitive supports.

Second, emotional expression should be legitimized across genders. Boys may benefit from permission-based spaces that normalize emotional articulation without shame, while girls may benefit from structured containment supports that prevent emotional overload. Counselors and mentors should attend to delayed processing, suppressed distress, survivor guilt, and anxiety patterns that may be intensified in gifted populations.

Third, purposeful engagement should be facilitated but not imposed. Opportunities for meaningful contribution—structured volunteering, peer mentoring, community projects—can restore agency and align with gifted youths' moral commitments. Such engagement must remain voluntary and supported to avoid turning moral sensitivity into burden.

Limitations and Future Research

This study is limited by its small sample size (N = 8) and its contextual specificity to the September–November 2024 crisis in Lebanon. Within qualitative narrative methodology, the purpose is not statistical generalization but depth of account and interpretive illumination; accordingly, this purposive sample was designed to enable close, gender-comparative reading of lived experience across a shared crisis period. The patterns identified should therefore be read as situated insights that may resonate with similar contexts, rather than as universal claims about how all gifted males and gifted females cope with war and displacement.

Transferability can be strengthened through future studies that include larger and more socioeconomically diverse samples, multiple regions, and longitudinal follow-up after displacement to trace how coping repertoires shift as safety, schooling, and routine are reassembled. In addition, because interviews were conducted primarily in English, some culturally embedded emotional vocabulary and idiomatic meaning may have been expressed differently than it would have been in Arabic; future work could incorporate explicitly bilingual interviewing and analysis to deepen interpretive fidelity. Further inquiry is also needed to examine how gender intersects with other identity markers (e.g., socioeconomic status, region, family responsibilities) and, where sampling allows, to move beyond binary gender categories when studying coping in gifted populations.

Conclusion

This study examined how gifted female and gifted male young adults in Lebanon processed and coped with the September–November 2024 crisis. While both groups experienced fear, routine collapse, and identity strain, gendered differences emerged in emotional expression, cognitive framing, and coping strategies. Gifted males more frequently narrated detachment, logical reframing, suppression, and academic disengagement; gifted females more frequently narrated emotional expression, journaling and music, relational coping, and community involvement alongside sustained—though reduced—academic engagement. Across both groups, family proximity and spiritual anchoring functioned as shared protective resources. The study concludes that mentors, parents, and caregivers should avoid one-size-fits-all expectations of coping and should instead provide safe, choice-based, and relationally attuned spaces that legitimize diverse coping styles while protecting educational pathways and purposeful engagement

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