

Counseling the Gifted

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It's All About Identity

By Andrew S. Mahoney, M.S.,L.P.C.,L.M.F.T.

In my counseling practice, I work almost exclusively with gifted and talented people. Over the years, I've identified certain themes that seem to be universal to this population, and my work has been deeply affected by them.

Those who know my work have heard me increasingly advocate that we focus on the gifted person's identity formation and development of self. Without this focus, the needs of this population may not be appropriately addressed.

I came to this conclusion after years of canvassing perceptions of gifted people and their parents, counselors, teachers and others who have a direct relationship with them. I have become increasingly aware of how far our society has to go to provide gifted people affirmation and validation of their existence. At best, we are benign, if not in total denial of giftedness.

Each time I ask a group of masters- and doctoral-degree students if they are gifted and their response is dead silence with maybe, way in the back of the room one hand being raised — it happened recently at a conference in Chicago where I spoke to about 100 graduate educators and administrators — each time that happens, I am saddened.

Each time I meet a person insightful enough to recognize his giftedness but afraid to identify himself as gifted for fear his peers will label him conceited, I am saddened.

Each time I meet a young gifted person who has consciously decided not to succeed for fear she will be seen as a nerd and have no friends, I am saddened.

Each time I consult on a case where a gifted child's behavior has been deemed to be pathology rather than a typical gifted response, I am saddened.

Each time I listen to a gifted person share how he believes he has never fit in with others, and doesn't know why, I am saddened.

Each time I see the media portray a prodigy like a 10-year-old college graduate as the typical gifted child, I am saddened. Must a person be in the 99.9 percentile of intelligence to qualify as gifted?

Each time I see professionals use people like Einstein or Van Gogh as role models, I am saddened. Are the only role models for the gifted highly revered masters, and dead ones, at that?

I've had encounters like these all too often. Each time I have one, I am saddened. It is because of these painful testimonies that I have so fervently focused my study on gifted identity.

The notion of being gifted must be based on the reality of daily living, not on some romanticized, perfect ideal. In my work with gifted people, we explore not only how they are gifted, but also where their deficits lie. They need to develop a whole sense of who they are in relationship to their giftedness.

Research needs to move in the direction of understanding the complexity in the relationship between identity formation, achievement and self esteem. We as parents, educators and counselors must work toward creating more systems and awareness that affirm the very existence of gifted people. This might include advocating for "appropriate" media coverage of the gifted's needs, not the prostitution of their wares. This also might require expanded definitions of "gifted" that account for the complexity of the gifted's behavior. De-romanticizing the gifted would end glorification of the suicides of gifted people. It would present real, approachable role models.

I believe the work begins with parents, educators and counselors, not with the children, others or outside forces. The challenge lies in our own awareness, acknowledgment, appreciation, and acceptance of being gifted. We can no longer expect our gifted children, students, clients, patients and others to embrace their identity as gifted people when, as their guides, we have not.

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