

Giftedness and Academic Underachievement

What lies beneath

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Abstract: This article presents an example within clinical counseling of a highly gifted 19-year-old male student whose academic capabilities fall in the 99.9th percentile. He entered therapy with a desire to understand his presenting problem of academic decline over the past several years of high school as well as to deal with the impact of his decline, both on his emotional development and his academic future. An analyzed tapescript is presented in which the therapist leads him to recognize and confront his defenses and discover the depth of his emotional distress regarding his current life disposition.

The case presented in this article is an analysis of the etiology of underachievement as well as emotional struggle in a highly gifted young adult male student. As will be seen, the tapescript provides perspective on the complexity of the client's struggle with self, emotion, achievement, identity and worth. The author hopes to highlight some of the insights needed in counseling the highly gifted, which include awareness of deep, underlying issues as well as the subtlety with which such issues may present. This young man's dilemma, although unique, is reflective of many highly gifted underachievers. Comments regarding dynamics and issues are included. The client is indicated by the letter "C," the therapist by the letter "A." Some details of place and circumstance have been changed to secure confidentiality.

As the session unfolds, this young man's brilliance will become obvious. This client is able to use his own verbal precocity to build a highly complex cognitive defense posture. The defense protects his emotional world, his feelings of powerlessness and his loneliness. At times, he demonstrates his ability to use the right psychological verbiage to keep his therapist at bay. His use of words and concepts is often quite appropriate to his behavior and so may entice a therapist to avoid the real emotional material. Clearly, the task for the therapist is to stay highly aware of what may lie beneath of the client's acute verbal ability or risk of being seduced by

verbal pyrotechnics. This young man is actually aware of his ability to ward people off with his language wizardry, and this, toward the end of the session, becomes an overt issue of the work.

The nature of the session transcribed here is confrontive. It is important to know that the author had built a level of rapport with his client for several months before the challenge described occurred. When working with a highly verbal gifted client like this, the therapist must do much foundational work validating the existence of giftedness and exploring what it means to accept one's identity as a gifted person. When people feel validated concerning their giftedness, they are more open and willing to explore the not-so-positive aspects of self. At this point the therapist can begin to challenge defenses surrounding deficits or vulnerable areas related to performance (Mahoney, 1997). A gifted individual struggling with performance issues as a young adult has a very well-constructed defense posture. It should not be assaulted but worked with delicately and with respect for the number of years that have gone into its construction. For this particular individual, facing deficits regarding his performance skills stands to shake the very foundation of his identity as a gifted person. This challenge to his defenses also opens him up to an emotional sense of self that he has yet to explore.

C: I've been applying to colleges. My top choices right now would be Stanford, which would be really cool, or Georgia Tech, which would be okay. I'm not sure I could get into Stanford because my grades aren't all that great, and I'm not sure if a school like Stanford would be willing to take a chance.

A: I'm not sure I understand just what you are struggling with. About what are you "not sure"?

C: My grades are not all that good, and I'm afraid Stanford wouldn't be willing to take the chance that I would do better at college than I did in high school.

A: So you're afraid of ...

C: I'm afraid of being rejected.

A: You're afraid of being rejected because of your grade performance?

C: Right. What's that look for, Andy?

A: The idea of going to Stanford challenges something about your performance. It sounds like it would require something different from you than if you went to Georgia Tech.

C: The point is, it's pretty much too late now. By the time I apply to Stanford, my second quarter grades won't be in, so my first quarter grades will significantly impact my chances.

Here we begin to see an uncovering of two crucial underlying issues for this highly gifted young man. First, his sense of worth: "Do I deserve to have my need for challenge met?" Second, his struggle with academic performance.

A: I feel you're sidetracking on the rejection issue.

C: I am talking about what is for me a very intellectual, straightforward subject: choosing a college. You're trying to operate on an emotional level and we're going right by each other.

The client is able to carefully outline our process and identify his intellectualization. He is now beginning to make clarifications for himself about when he is or is not, operating on an emotional versus cognitive level. By doing this kind of analysis, he may be trying to deflect the therapist from contending with the emotional issues underlying his problem of school choice.

C: I'm not talking about how I'm feeling. I'm talking, this-is-the-way-it-is kind of thing. I'm not talking about how I feel.

A: Yes; how come?

C: I guess I haven't thought about it

Here he says he hasn't "thought about it," yet in his last comment he referred to his college decision process as having been "intellectual" and "straightforward."

C: I have been worried about it: Am I going to get in; and am I not going to get in? Why would I get in? Why wouldn't I get in?

This circular intellectual obsessing over whether he can "get in" is a symptom of how stuck he is with the surface presenting nature of a deeper issue with which he struggles.

A: So tell me why you wouldn't get in.

C: Because my grades aren't good enough.

A: And the notion of going to Stanford and challenging yourself to get in forces you to deal with what -- regarding your performance?

C: But I can't change it.

A: What is "it"?

C: I can't change my first quarter grades.

At this point, the client is beginning to appear uncomfortable with the fact that I am holding him to discuss feelings about his performance, and how those feelings are related to his college choice, perhaps even to deeper issues.

A: What can't you change about your performance?

C: There isn't anything I can't change about my performance.

A: Okay, let's say that is the hopeful side. Talk about the reality of your struggle. What I'm hearing is, "If I go to Georgia Tech, I won't have the same challenge that I would have at Stanford."

C: No, that's not it. It's in trying to get into Georgia Tech that I don't have the same challenge as I do in trying to get into Stanford.

By keeping his focus on the idea of getting into college, the client doesn't have to face the deeper issues related to his underachievement and insecurity. His defenses arise here because there is a whole struggle lying beneath this presenting issue.

C: There is nothing I can do about what prevents me from getting into Stanford, because my first quarter grades can't be changed.

A: You're pretty convincing. If I didn't know you well, you would have me completely snowed right now.

C: I'm not trying to snow you. We're talking about something that is straightforward. This is what my counselors have said, this is what my Mom has said, this is what I have seen looking at colleges: My first quarter grades are what count.

A: Pulling out the troops, are you? How many troops have you got, anyway?

Here the client chuckles, demonstrating that on some level he realizes that he is being defensive and has gotten caught trying to conceal the deeper issue of his performance. He has built his defense to an elaborate level, yet, as his therapist paces along with him, he slowly runs out of steam.

A: The more troops you pull out, the more I'm going to charge.

C: What do you want me to do here, Andy?

A: I want you to talk about your apprehension and the struggle that has brought you to this point. You're not really challenging yourself around this issue with Stanford.

C: That's because I don't feel there is anything I can change.

A: So you feel powerless?

C: I feel very powerless in that situation. I feel all I can do is write down whatever info they want on their little essay and send it in, and have my counselor write me a recommendation letter.

A: And what is this making you face?

***This is the turning point in the session.** The client is now faced with his insecurities and inadequacies, as well as his unmet needs as a highly gifted individual. The discussion now drops to a deeper level than his defended space of getting into school. He must now face his own complexity and come to terms with how his ability has been*

met and challenged over his life. The struggle is really about both sides of the coin: his assets and his deficits. Many gifted people have never examined their deficits or areas in need of development. Either their facades are not seen and pierced, or their exceptional abilities mask their deficits, or they have never encountered a challenge that pushed beyond the facades and compensatory behaviors.

C: I am not perfect. There are people who can do things I cannot.

At this point, his ego has become quite fragile. His affect is noticeably different; he sounds humbled and saddened. This is not an issue he has ever discussed openly.

A: So at some level, this matter is challenging you to look at your imperfections and your deficits.

C: Uh-huh.

A: And, it is challenging you to look at competition and your area of expertise, your area of skill.

C: Ah! There I must disagree. My area of expertise has nothing to do with grades.

The client has brought back his defense by returning to the issue of grades. The previous statement felt wounding to him, since it reflected too accurately his area of insecurity about competing to enter a high-ranking college.

A: We are not talking about grades; we are talking about worth issues, deficits, and about taking yourself to a level of challenge that keeps you growing, learning, and being.

C: I missed most of that, Andy. How are we discussing worth issues and deficits? I understand that in order to deal with the fact that I may not get into Stanford I have to deal with my weaknesses and imperfections, but ...

A: "But." Being the linguist that you are, what does it mean when a person puts a "but" at the end of a statement?

C: (Chuckles.) It negates everything said before that "but."

The client has here negated what he actually doesn't understand: that he has to deal with his weaknesses and imperfections.

A: Okay.

C: I keep thinking about grades because that's the only thing that would be keeping me from getting into Stanford.

The issue of grades has become crystallized in the client's defense posture. He has used his defense of grades for so long that he is convinced there is no other rationale or contributor to his struggles. So he resorts back to them as a marker, as the controller of his fate. This is probably due to a long history of expectations with reinforcement being placed on him to perform. Grades are not the real issue. The client relies on or brings

up grades as a safe place to rationalize and thereby deflect a host of issues relating to his giftedness: feelings of inadequacy, shame over his competency, experiences from his past that have led him to his current presenting dilemma. The therapist's responsibility now is to help the client move through his defenses and begin to understand himself more accurately and realistically as a highly gifted individual with real academic weaknesses and feelings of vulnerability about himself. To that end, he needs assistance to (a) gain more control over his destiny, and (b) disengage from his familiar patterns of defense that hold him back. Clearly he will not easily let go of his focus on grades. Yet, it is crucial that he begin to see what is involved here. This is the first authentic and safe discussion he has ever had wherein he was faced with his giftedness in terms of needing to develop, needing to be challenged, or in needing help. His needs become evident through his manifestation of helplessness / powerlessness about not being able to go to the college of his choice due to grades.

C: I know my SAT scores are high enough, and my recommendations are going to be great.

Unfortunately for many of this type of gifted individuals, the high SAT scores are almost a disservice. The client can use them as leverage for his defense posture and again rationalize that he will do just fine.

A: What do grades represent?

C: For me, grades represent nothing.

Although the client has become fixated around grade performance as a marker of his worth, at a deeper level, this statement is actually true for him.

A: Now let's talk about the statement you just made in terms of your defenses.

C: It could be that I believe grades represent nothing because I don't get good grades. I don't want to believe they represent anything because if they represent something, it means I have a weakness. Actually, they do represent something: an ability to work with the system.

A: That is one perspective.

C: They represent a combination of being intelligent and working with the system. If you can do both, you will make all A's.

A: Aren't you sacrificing something in yourself in all of this? Your challenge to authority, i.e., the system, is compromising your opportunity to be who you are, to develop yourself in a whole way.

C: It's not a matter of challenging authority, or the system. It's that I don't like to do the things the system asks me to do. I don't understand those things, and no one will explain them to me.

This is a common experience for gifted individuals. As they are growing up, their giftedness often masks their need for early help in understanding the system, and learning to differentiate themselves from the system and its expectations. Many times the gifted are given explanations but often those explanations make no sense to them and do not take into account that the need for explanation may be the gifted individual's way of noting a weakness in his or her ability. There is also another possibility that the challenge to the system or authority may be a moral issue for the gifted individual in need of clarification.

A: Maybe that's part of the problem: nobody ever explained the system to you, nor supported you in terms of your struggle with the system.

C: Even those times when people explained things to me, I wanted to say, "It doesn't work that way for me. I don't do things that way."

A: That's a really well-defended position.

C: It's not like I haven't tried things their way! It just doesn't work; I don't learn in their way!

A: I'm obviously touching some nerve here, because you've gotten your dander up.

C: I don't like being unable to work with the system.

A: I wonder if you could talk about what it is like for you to know that you may not get into Stanford because of your grades.

C: Well, I haven't thought about it.

In truth, he has thought about it; he just hasn't felt about it. In other words, this individual has no problem stating that he may not get into Stanford because of his grades. What he does have a problem with is the awareness of his feelings about not getting into a school that represents what he believes matches his true ability. He is also faced with a larger system here that involves more than he anticipated. In the past he would be able to manipulate his environment to avoid his feelings of inadequacy and his deficit areas. Now he no longer can do that same behavior of denial. The grades will matter now, particularly if he wants to get into Stanford.

C: I defend against it by saying, "No matter what, I'll get into Georgia Tech, so ..."

A: And who are you fooling?

C: Me. I realize that; I know that, but ...

A: But what?

C: Knowing doesn't stop me.

A: So why don't you talk about what it really means to you, this notion of possibly not getting into Stanford, because of your grades?

C: Well, it tells me that I am wrong in one aspect: my entire philosophy about school, grades and the system. My philosophy has always been that grades do not matter.

The client has convinced himself of the truth of the statement "that grades do not matter" over many years. This is a common defense for the highly gifted who have felt unchallenged, unsupported, or who struggle with performance skill problems. This defense "that grades do not matter" should never be taken lightly. When heard from the gifted, it is an indication of some serious issues such as possible learning disabilities, performance skill weaknesses, or underlying emotional concerns.

C: It turns out in the real world, they matter. Grades make a difference no matter what I like to think, and knowing that makes me feel powerless. It makes me feel helpless to realize there is nothing I can do about it, and still, there is nothing I can do to change it.

While his hopelessness is very ingrained, it is at the crux of what his therapy has to address for him.

A: What is "it"?

C: The way I do things; my system; my learning model; the way I assimilate information; the way I interpret info, analyze it and spit it back out. With some teachers it doesn't work.

A: So therefore, "I..." what?

C: I don't know.

There is a sad affect to his tone.

A: I think this is where your struggle lies. I also think it is the cause of your struggle with being able to have all the opportunity you are capable of having.

C: From six through eighth grade, I felt like a square peg in a round hole.

A: There's something about the way you say that, it's almost like you've become a victim.

C: I'm not a victim. Well, I am a victim, but I'm a victim of myself.

A: I think that's precisely what we are touching here. I'm wondering how you can address the issue.

By reflecting that he is the victim to himself, his therapist is helping this client to see that he has power in this dynamic and can effect change.

C: I think I am a victim of my own need to be helpless. Looking back, I definitely have a

need to be somewhat helpless. My need to not have power over myself gives me an escape. It gives me a way out, a way not to have to admit my flaws and weaknesses. If I am powerless over myself, then if I have weaknesses, it's not my fault. There is nothing I can do about it. If I came home every day and studied for an hour and a half, or even half an hour, I could make A's and B's. I know that; but my way out is "Well, I couldn't make myself do that."

Here the client first talks as though it would be easy for him to change. Then, he actually admits it would be harder than he at first claims. Forcing himself to sit down and do the required work is much more complex than it seems at first glance. His whole sense of himself as a being is at stake. His associations with actually doing the work are intertwined with a very self-developed defense system designed to protect himself, emotionally, from a lack of self-worth. If he actually began to force himself to study daily, some of this deficits would begin to emerge.

Changing patterns of denial and performance avoidance is a very complex matter, one involving much more work than can be demonstrated in a single therapy session. It may even require the acquisition of additional help, such as an educational specialist. What is crucial at this stage of the change process, however, is the therapist's ability to raise the client's awareness of the problem and to help him acknowledge it so that changes can be tolerated as the defense mechanism is being dismantled.

A: Perhaps you can't make yourself study daily as yet. So, you come up with this complex rationalization and use all of your verbal and intellectual abilities to justify your position. In that way, you never have to face your dilemma, the hard work. Because you're bright enough, you just snow people.

C: It's not as though I don't do hard intellectual work. I just don't do the hard intellectual work they ask me to do.

A: I know. There's a part of you that says, "As long as everything is on my terms in life, I'll perform. As long as I'm not challenged in a way that makes me uncomfortable, I'll do the work."

C: If I'm comfortable, then everything is okay; I can do the work.

A: And what's the reality?

C: The reality is, the situation will never be under my control.

A: Right. The illusion you present is that you have the control and you're not going to be controlled by anyone else.

C: While it feels like I can't control myself ... Andy, the problem with these delusions and facades I set up is that I am smart enough to figure them out; I'm smart enough to know what is going on, and smart enough to know I can sit down and study. I'm smart enough to know that I'm lying to myself when I say I don't have the power to make myself study. But you're right; it would be very difficult for me to sit down and do things on somebody else's terms.

A: You see it as somebody else's terms, and I think that is your way of justifying not facing your deficits.

C: But, why isn't it "someone else's terms"? I mean, when someone tells me to go home and practice something that I have known for three years, that's the kind of thing I hate.

A: I'm not discounting that; it's probably true. I wonder how often, though, you would surround yourself with people, mentors or teachers who would challenge you to go home and practice something you don't know.

C: All my good teachers do. All the teachers that I like do that, and I learn from them.

A: So you know that you can be successful. Knowing that about yourself, and knowing that you possibly won't get into Stanford creates a struggle for you. If you don't look at the dilemma and really explore what it is about, where will that leave you?

C: I could follow that same path all my life. Because of my rationalization of the whole matter, I may not look into the matter, and then things will not change. There will always be similar situations, and I will have to either deal with my rationalization or not live my life.

A: Where does that leave you emotionally, right now?

C: Kind of locked up; stuck.

A: Can you give me a sense of what it's like to be "locked up, stuck"?

C: If I were going to make a word for it, "emotostasis."

A: My sense is that you are locked up and I can't get in; I don't have the key.

This statement is put forth to reflect how alone he feels; so locked in alone that not even his therapist can get in.

C: I'm worried. I'm struggling with the idea. I have always been able to pass any test with high grades. Any kind of intellectual test I can always pass. Since I'm always over the threshold, that conflicts with the idea that I might not get into Stanford. Getting into Stanford is definitely a test, and even though I'm in the 99.9th percentile, I may not get into Stanford.

A: Therefore, you might what?

C: Well, I would be failing.

A: So to avoid the failure?

C: I try to avoid applying to Stanford.

A: And the price you pay?

C: Not getting in, which I could possibly do.

A: You might not get in. By avoiding taking on the challenge, you don't have to face being imperfect.

C: Right.

A: You can stay perfect forever!

Or so his delusion would have him believe.

C: I don't have to screw up.

A: No. You don't have to make a mistake, a failure, or anything.

C: Maybe that's another reason for constant emotostasis: "I'm intellectual, man; I have no emotion." That could be a result of my constant failures in the area of emotions, and my constant successes in the area of intellectual achievement. Both could result because of my fear of being imperfect. All I have to do is not have any emotional experiences. Then, I can't fail! That's pretty scary.

A: Scary?

C: Uh-huh; scary that I have the ability to avoid any sense of failure or emotion, and scary that some part of me considers it healthy.

A: You're not giving me a sense of "scary." I hear the word, but I don't understand how you're scared.

C: It's a struggle for me to keep from blocking the emotion; it would be easier to just go back into my head.

The client is now using the word "emotion," which is quite a shift from the beginning of the session.

C: When I tell you I feel a certain way, you hear the word and you may get a sense of it right then. But as I start to explain it, you lose it completely. That's because as soon as I start trying to explain it, I lose it too. Then ...

A: Just stay with the fear.

Here the client utters a long sigh.

A: Stay with the fear; don't fight it. Say whatever comes to you.

C: It scares me that I have, for so long a time, been allowing myself to avoid a part of me that should be important to me.

A: That part is?

C: Emotional contact with other people; I mean, deep emotional contact, being close to other people.

A: Is this in any way connected to the failure issue? If I fail, am I more apt to be in touch with my emotional self? Help me understand how they relate.

C: Are you asking for something different than I said before?

A: Both are symbolic of vulnerability.

It must be remembered that he does, in fact, know academic failure. However, he is not acknowledging it at this point.

C: Well, I don't really know intellectual failure. But I think emotional failure, failure in relationships, failure in dealing properly with other people, or in dealing with other people at all has allowed me to set up this defense mechanism of avoidance -- not really "allowed" me, almost forced me, because I'm so scared of failure.

The client is beginning to link his emotional struggle with his "dealing properly" with people, his performance, and his ability to deal with his imperfections.

A: What is the price you pay, the consequence?

C: If you don't try because you think you'll fail, then you can't succeed either. If you avoid emotional relationships and emotional contact, you don't have a chance to be successful at that. You continue to fail over and over again. I continue to fail over and over again.

A: Failure is not just an emotional or relational issue for you. It also involves your academic ability. For you, the two are linked together. It seems easier for you to talk about your failure emotionally than it is to talk about your failure in an academic sense, although both are legitimate.

It has become clear to the therapist at this point that there is a crucial link between this client's emotional struggle with relationships and his failure academically.

C: I am much more scared of my failure in an academic sense. I've never been punished or berated for my failure emotionally by anyone but me.

The dynamic at play here is both overt and covert. He is berated if he fails academically, but his emotional failures are either ignored or not even recognized. Thus, there is actually no accountability in place for his emotional performance, just his academic performance. The effects of this for gifted individuals are a poor self-concept and low self-esteem in both the intellectual and emotional realm. This also leaves the individual with very little incentive and support to achieve both intrinsically and extrinsically.

C: I punish myself for my failures, emotionally: I feel bad, or I feel guilty. But in my intellectual failures my family goes to work on me because so much is expected of me. So when I fail, "Oh, God!" (My mom has been doing that to me because I didn't get such great grades last quarter.)

A: It seems you kind of have the two elements, emotional and intellectual, fused together.

C: Is the solution for me to get better grades or to learn to accept my failures? Do I learn to accept the fact that I'm not always going to get good grades, or is it both?

A: The question is, "If it's both, where does that take you?"

C: That leads me to a conflict.

A: What is the conflict?

C: If I learn to accept my failures, chances are I am going to become complacent in them. If I get good grades, why should I worry about failing?

At this point, the client's anxiety level has risen significantly. This is quite likely due to the overlap of his heightened awareness of his issues around academic performance, his feelings of failure and inadequacy, and the conflict of changing this complex struggle he now faces with his performance and his emotional self.

A: I think you went to extremes on both sides of the coin.

C: Okay.

A: I think what you are talking about is primary to your core. My sense is that considering all this has raised your anxiety level significantly.

C: Probably. Is that little stress release toy still in your office?

A: What are you getting out of all this?

C: I sense that there are a number of things I need to think about. I need to set aside some time, which I don't usually do, sit down and think about myself; think about the issues I have to deal with, and try to puzzle them out. I need to think. I really ought to do that more often, so when I come here, I can make more productive use of our time.

A: There is a part of you that likes to do the same thing with me that you do with certain teachers, or certain situations. You put up a pretty good dance and have a way to sidestep (avoid, that is) the heat.

C: I don't want to do that; it's anti-process.

A: I think it's a challenge for you to come here and deal with therapy as something of your own choice, not something that you are made to do.

C: If I go home, set aside some time, sit down with a piece of paper and figure out how I feel about my life, peel away some layers, look at what emerges and write down what I'm thinking and feeling, then when I come in here, I've got it on a piece of paper. I can't avoid the issues that I've come in with.

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In this session, it has become apparent there is a crucial link between the emotional struggle this young man has with others and his struggle with academic achievement. While on the surface, this might not have been apparent at all, the client's ability to confront himself in the therapeutic process allowed him to move beyond his defenses and touch his helplessness and fear of failure. He came to see the enormous price he is paying for this elaborate defense posture when he was faced with deeper reasons than he anticipated concerning getting into the school of his first choice. As a gifted person, this young man has had a long history of defending his deficits and vulnerability. His pattern of defending himself against having to face emotional vulnerability and his academic weaknesses has cost him both his esteem and the enjoyment of closeness with others. He came to recognize that significant expectations were held forth for him in the academic area, but not in the emotional realm. Nor did he have these expectations of himself. This imbalance may well be at the root of both his lack of concern for the academic challenge, as well as the lack of matched challenge in his life. Lacking focus on his emotional development, he would likely be severely hampered in sustaining the pressure of being highly gifted. His previous coping strategy has lain in the erection of his defense structures. By being aided to dismantle his defenses and learning new strategies, this client may well now move through the issues that block both his emotional and academic success.

This analysis of a counseling session has provided a concrete example of how a complex and critical relationship exists between gifted individuals' emotional domain and their performance in the world. It is crucial that client and therapist jointly endeavor to explore deeply the defenses of such individuals, which can be both subtle and complicated. In this way it is possible to attain an empowering understanding of the emotional challenges that can lie beneath such presenting problems as underachievement.

References

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