

# The Emotional Drama of Giftedness: Self Concept, Perfectionism, and Sensitivity

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## **Purpose**

The purpose of this Proceedings paper is to address three complex issues that confront gifted individuals and those who interact with them: developing healthy self-concepts, transforming perfectionistic tendencies into productivity, and effectively coping with emotional sensitivity. The "lived experience" of these issues in daily life provides both frustrations and joys. This dynamic tension makes life richer but more problematic. Following our outline of our presentation at the SAGE conference, this paper will discuss self-concept, perfectionism, and emotional sensitivity respectively

## **Self-Concept**

Teachers of gifted students, as teachers of any other students, are perennially concerned with self-concept of students. Over the past five years, we have developed an approach to self-concept enhancement which is assessment-based, using an instrument we developed called the Pyryt Mendaglio Self-Perception Survey (PMSPS) (Mendaglio & Pyryt, 1995; Pyryt & Mendaglio, 1994). The PMSPS is a comprehensive assessment measure which provides specific information for intervention. In an effort to address the complexity of self-concept, we have taken a multidimensional, multi-theoretical approach that incorporates established theoretical perspectives, current empirical findings, and a novel feature called valence. The Scale is termed multidimensional since its construction reflects a multi-factor approach. The PMSPS operationally defines self-concept in terms of several factors (academic, social, athletic, physical appearance, and trustworthiness). The scale is also described as multi-theoretical since it was constructed to reflect three major theoretical perspectives to self-concept (reflected appraisal, social comparison, and attribution). The reflected appraisals approach (Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934; Sullivan, 1953) emphasizes the contribution of feedback from significant others in the development of self-concept. In social comparison (Festinger, 1954), individuals contrast the perception of their ability, behaviour, and accomplishments to those of others. In attribution (Kelley, 1967), individuals infer their own traits based on self-observations similar to their inferring the dispositions of others based on their observations of the behavior of others. To further address the conceptualization of self-concept, we have included a "valence" component to the PMSPS so that the Scale adheres to our conceptualization of self-concept. The student is asked to rate the importance of each facet and significant other.

The content of the PMSPS operationalizes the multi-theoretical perspectives noted above. For the reflected appraisals portion the students are asked to rate themselves as they perceive each of the four significant others perceive them (e.g., "I perceive that my best friend thinks I'm smart"). This is done for each of the five facets (academic, social, athletic, social, and trustworthiness). For the social comparison portions they are asked to rate how they perceive themselves compared to age peers for each of the four factors (e.g., "I do better at sports than other children my age"). For the attribution portion, they are asked to explain domain competence in terms of an aptitude or trait (e.g., "When I do the right thing, it is because I am trustworthy"). For each of the 30 self-concept items, the student is asked to rate oneself on a four-point scale ranging from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree. The valence items are rated on a three-point scale, with 1, 2, 3 indicating Not Important, Important, and Very Important, respectively. Once the PMSPS is administered and scored, we propose that the teacher or counsellor interview the student with a threefold purpose: to discuss the results with the student, to confirm specific deficit areas that were identified by the Scale, and to plan a course of intervention. General discussion of the results with the student would include elaboration of some of the ratings. For example, low self-perception in certain areas should be explored, identification of reference group used in the social comparison items should be sought. The valence scores should be pursued. In short, the teacher is directed to use the self-ratings as a guide to structure the interview. The confirmation and elaboration of any low ratings are important components of the interview. In all of this discussion, the teacher should be interested in the adolescent's perspective. It is important to remember that when working with gifted adolescents that they are particularly sensitive to discrepancies that we adults present. When we ask students what they think of themselves, we must be prepared to accept their response. Should we convey, either verbally or nonverbally, that they should be different this would preclude our obtaining the validation of the information that the Scale has given us. The discussion with the student needs to bear in mind that the Scale, like other self-report instruments, can be manipulated by the student. An important underlying purpose of the interview is to gauge whether the ratings that were done match the manner in which the adolescent talks about self. Further, the results of the Scale should be contrasted with the teacher's own knowledge of the gifted adolescent gleaned from observation.

The last purpose of the interview is to assist the teacher in planning an approach to intervention. With a confirmation of the self-perception ratings, the teacher can now use the multi-faceted, multi-theoretical basis of the Scale to advantage. We believe that certain guidelines for intervention emerge from the three models (reflected appraisals, social comparison, and attribution).

## **Perfectionism**

One of the difficulties in describing the construct of perfectionism is recognizing the multiple uses that occur in the literature. There is a fine line between striving

to reach high standards of excellence and feeling self-defeated through the inability to reach unreasonable expectations. Some writers, deal with this dichotomy by contrasting two types of perfectionism. Bransky, Jenkins-Friedman, and Murphy (1987) distinguish between enabling perfectionism that empowers individuals and disabling perfectionism that cripples individuals. Hamachek (1978) distinguishes between normal and neurotic perfectionism. Other writers (Barrow & More, 1983; Burns, 1980; Pacht, 1984) use perfectionism to refer to the negative aspects of the syndrome.

Barrow and Moore (1983) prefer the term perfectionistic thinking to perfectionism. Perfectionistic thinking is viewed as a cognitive pattern that many people use at various times to varying degrees, whereas perfectionism implies a trait that an individual either has or doesn't have. Barrow and Moore (1983) have identified common elements of perfectionistic thinking. Frequently, dichotomous (all-or-none) thinking is present. Another element of perfectionistic thinking is viewing goals as necessities rather outcomes worth striving for. Perfectionistic thinking often leads to focusing on unmet goals and challenges rather than savouring successes.

There are currently two instruments, both called the Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale, that assess the multidimensional aspects of perfectionism. Frost, Marten, Lahart, and Rosenblate (1990) developed a 35-item instrument that assesses six dimensions of perfectionism (concern over mistakes, personal standards, parental expectations, parental criticism, doubts about action, and organization. Hewitt and Flett (1991) developed a 45-item instrument that assesses three dimensions related to perfectionism ( Self-Oriented Perfectionism that focuses on excessively high self standards; Socially-Prescribed Perfectionism that addresses perceptions of standards and expectations set by others; and Other-Oriented Perfectionism that examines an individual's expectations for others). Both instruments have been found to demonstrate adequate psychometric properties.

Among educators of the gifted the link between giftedness and perfectionism is clearly established. The tendency toward perfectionism is an item on the most widely-used teacher rating scale for the identification of superior students (Renzulli, Smith, White, Callahan, & Hartman, 1976). Dealing with perfectionism among the gifted is often cited as one of the counselling needs of the gifted (Kerr, 1991; Silverman, 1993). Typically educators concerned with gifted children are concerned about two negative impacts of perfectionism: underachievement and emotional turmoil. In terms of underachievement, Whitmore (1980) reported that perfectionistic tendencies makes some gifted students vulnerable for underachievement because they do not submit work unless it is perfect. In terms of emotional stress, perfectionism is seen to cause feelings of worthlessness and depression when gifted individuals fail to live up to unrealistic expectations. DeLisle (1986, 1990) has provided anecdotal evidence that perfectionism places some gifted students at-risk for suicide.

Several things can be done to help individuals to effectively cope with perfectionism tendencies. First, individuals need to recognize that 80% of the reward structure comes from 20% of one's activities. This realization will help individuals concentrate on the few things that require extra effort. Second, individuals also need to develop the capacity for constructive failure by recognizing that present performance, even if imperfect, sets the tone for future improvement. Third, individuals need to develop self-concepts separate from their products. They need to understand that they have inherent dignity and self-worth which is unconditional. Fourth, they should recognize that the commitment to excellence is a lifelong struggle and they need to view present circumstances as a step toward the future. Fifth, individuals with perfectionistic tendencies need to set realistic goals. Finally, perfectionistic individuals need to find vocational interests and pursuits that can bring joy.

## **Sensitivity**

There is consensus that gifted persons are characterized by heightened sensitivity. Parents, teachers as well as writers in the field of gifted education agree on this point. Sensitivity, as used in this context, is viewed as multi-faceted. It refers to both the cognitive as well as the affective domain (Mendaglio, 1995). In the cognitive area, sensitivity consists of perceptiveness. For example, gifted children tune into the nuances of interpersonal communication. They can detect and respond to the subtleties of nonverbal cues such as eye contact or vocal qualities. All children engage in this perceptiveness especially when engaged in communication with significant adults, but the gifted child detects more of these cues than non-gifted. This heightened awareness of another person's verbal and nonverbal behaviour can lead to some interpersonal complications. One illustration of this is a situation where gifted children are asked to comply with a parent's or teacher's request. A gifted child may detect nonverbal signs of emotionality in the adult's nonverbal behaviour, such as changes in vocal qualities or facial expression. Rather than responding to the verbal part of the adult's communication, the child reacts to the emotional tone that he/she identifies in the adult. In some cases, the gifted child may take issue with the "how" of the request rather than the "what". It is not uncommon for such scenarios to result in the child's responding with: "you have no right to talk to me that way!" In addition to not complying to the request, a gifted child often comments on the manner in which the adult has communicated to the child. In other situations such perceptiveness leads to expressions of concern. For example, a child may ask a parent "What's wrong?" with appropriate vocal qualities when she/he notices nonverbal signs associated with negative emotions or stress.

In the affective domain, sensitivity consists of the child's experiencing of emotions in self and others. When parents and teachers refer to sensitivity in descriptions of gifted children, it is the affective domain to which they refer. In this sense, gifted children are usually easily moved emotionally. As with the cognitive

aspects of sensitivity, the affective facet is also double edged. In the positive sense, a gifted child may be awestruck by daily experiences or appreciate aesthetic objects such as paintings. On the negative side, he/she may be easily offended or hurt by remarks of others. In some cases, the child may be so sensitive to criticism that we witness an overreaction to neutral statements made to them. For example, a parent makes a statement that she has noticed that the child has not done his/her homework. Parents are often surprised at the intensity of the child's emotional reaction to statements which contain no criticism or demands. Affective sensitivity also includes heightened awareness of the emotions in others. Some of these children are so adept at this that they actually experience the emotions of others. With this comes a concern for others. This empathic connection with others may extend well beyond a child's immediate family and environment. It can extend to feelings of concern, sadness, and frustration elicited by awareness of issues characterized by injustice around the globe.

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