


# Implications for Addressing the Psychosocial Needs of Gifted Individuals: A Response to Subotnik, Olszewski-Kubilius, and Worrell (2011)

Gifted Child Quarterly  
56(4) 206–209  
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DOI: 10.1177/0016986212456076  
http://gcq.sagepub.com  


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## Abstract

In response to the article, “Rethinking Giftedness and Gifted Education: A Proposed Direction Forward Based on Psychological Science,” by Subotnik, Olszewski-Kubilius, and Worrell (2011), several questions arise with regard to the psychosocial needs of gifted individuals: What are the most important psychosocial variables we should take into account when cultivating talent? How do we measure these psychosocial variables? What is psychosocial coaching and how do we do it?

## Keywords

definition and/or conception of giftedness/talent, age/developmental stage, social and/or emotional development and adjustment

Subotnik, Olszewski-Kubilius, and Worrell (2011) have undertaken an enormous task and have proposed a comprehensive definition of giftedness based on their analysis of past and current information about giftedness and gifted education:

Giftedness is the manifestation of performance or production that is clearly at the upper end of the distribution in a talent domain even relative to that of other high-functioning individuals in that domain. Further, giftedness can be viewed as developmental, in that in the beginning stages, potential is the key variable; in later stages, achievement is the measure of giftedness; and in fully developed talents, eminence is the basis on which this label is granted. Psychosocial variables play an essential role in the manifestations of giftedness at every developmental stage. Both cognitive and psychosocial variables are malleable and need to be deliberately cultivated. (p. 7)

For those of us who research psychosocial issues among the gifted, the emphasis placed on psychosocial needs within this definition comes as a sigh of relief, as two of the more traditional views of giftedness in our field do not specifically address the psychosocial needs of gifted individuals. The National Association for Gifted Children (2008a) offers the following definition of giftedness:

Gifted individuals are those who demonstrate outstanding levels of aptitude (defined as an exceptional ability

to reason and learn) or competence (documented performance or achievement in top 10% or rarer) in one or more domains. Domains include any structured area of activity with its own symbol system (e.g., mathematics, music, language) and/or set of sensorimotor skills (e.g., painting, dance, sports). (n.p.)

Similarly, the federal definition of giftedness (as cited by the National Association for Gifted Children, 2008b) states,

The term gifted and talented student means children and youths who give evidence of higher performance capability in such areas as intellectual, creative, artistic, or leadership capacity, or in specific academic fields, and who require services or activities not ordinarily provided by the schools in order to develop such capabilities fully. (n.p.)

At the same time, though, the importance of psychosocial variables in nurturing special gifts and talents is not a new idea, as Subotnik et al. also note. For example, the Columbus Group (1991) says, “Giftedness is asynchronous development in which advanced cognitive abilities and heightened

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intensity combine to create inner experiences and awareness that are qualitatively different from the norm. . . . The uniqueness of the gifted renders them particularly vulnerable” (n.p.). Renzulli (1978) says, “Giftedness consists of an interaction among three clusters of traits—above-average but not necessarily superior general abilities, task commitment, and creativity” (p. 184).

Some argue that gifted individuals are inherently different with regard to their psychosocial needs and development in comparison to average ability individuals, such that gifted individuals can, in part, be recognized as gifted because of their unique psychosocial developmental needs (e.g., “maladaptive perfectionism, feelings of being different, or extreme sensitivity and intensity”; Subotnik et al., 2011, p. 10). Whether this is the case, or it is the case that psychosocial needs are simply facilitators of, or impediments to, a gifted individual’s talent development, as Subotnik et al. suggest, the focus and importance on psychosocial needs is really the same here: We simply must take into account the psychological, social, and emotional needs of gifted individuals in order to encourage and support talent development. What Subotnik et al. make clear is that the academic needs of gifted individuals *cannot* be met without simultaneously addressing their psychosocial needs.

After reading and considering Subotnik et al.’s (2011) approach to giftedness and gifted education, three questions arise with regard to the psychosocial needs of gifted individuals: What are the most important psychosocial variables we should take into account when cultivating talent? How do we measure these psychosocial variables? What is psychosocial coaching and how do we do it?

### Most Important Psychosocial Variables

Subotnik et al. (2011) note it is “critical that research determine which [psychosocial variables] are most important to successful transitions at various points in the talent-development process, particularly the transition from expertise to eminence, where psychosocial skills may play the greatest role” (p. 40). The authors offer some guidance regarding the most important psychosocial variables to consider, noting “opportunity and motivation” are central to the development of talent (p. 36). They also identify several other psychosocial variables that they believe are central to the facilitation of talent development: “persistence” (p. 7), “exertion of effort” (p. 7), “task commitment” (p. 13), “passion” (p. 13), “interest” (p. 13), “psychosocial strength” (p. 34), “social skills” (p. 34), “willingness to take strategic risks” (p. 40), “the ability to cope with challenges and handle criticism” (p. 40), and “competiveness” (p. 40). Motivation is an overarching construct that encompasses many of these variables. Motivation, though, is a complicated state, evidenced by the numerous theories and perspectives of motivation that

are in existence (e.g., attribution theory, Weiner, 1986; self-determination theory, Deci & Ryan, 2002). What Subotnik et al. (2011), and many others in the gifted education field, would likely argue is that intrinsic motivation is one of the guiding forces behind the development of potential, achievement, and eminence. Intrinsic motivation is internal and involves a drive to do something for its own sake (i.e., because the activity itself is rewarding), as compared with extrinsic motivation, which involves doing something to obtain something else (e.g., good grades, rewards, prestige; Woolfolk, 2009). While individuals can be motivated by both intrinsic and extrinsic reasons, depending on the activity or even the day, intrinsic motivation is one factor that can separate those who go on to become eminent in their fields from those who do not, as it usually allows for persistence, effort, and the willingness to take strategic risks, among other positive effects.

I also argue that self-concept, self-efficacy, and/or self-worth are determining psychosocial constructs that facilitate the development of talent. While some may view self-beliefs as inherently related to motivation (e.g., expectancy  $\times$  value theory, whereby you must have expectations for success to be motivated; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975; Wigfield & Eccles, 2002), I posit the notion of self-beliefs warrants individualized attention in the study of gifted individuals. In particular, academic self-concept is theoretically related to numerous achievement-related variables that are important in the facilitation of talent, including, among others, academic achievement (Huang, 2011), aspirations for graduate school (Rinn, 2007), motivation (Guay, Ratelle, Roy, & Litalien, 2010), choosing advanced coursework (Marsh & Yeung, 1997), and career intentions and aspirations (Nagengast & Marsh, 2012).

### Measurement of Psychosocial Variables and Skills

In addition to the obvious need for reliable and valid instruments or surveys to measure psychosocial variables, other unanswered questions remain: How much motivation does one need to develop talent? How much interest is enough? How much self-worth does one need? Is it possible to have too much motivation, interest, or self-worth? Or, is there a cut-off point for having “enough” motivation, interest, or self-worth, beyond which levels cease to matter? Furthermore, if some psychosocial variables are determining influences in the development and manifestation of talent, should levels of motivation and other psychosocial variables be assessed prior to acceptance to a gifted program or honors program? Or, should the potential to be motivated or interested be assessed? If so, what might this look like? A substantial amount of research should be devoted to these issues in order for those in the gifted education field to more fully understand the role of psychosocial variables in the development of talent.

## Providing Psychosocial Coaching at Each Stage

What is psychosocial coaching and how do we do it? How does it look different across developmental levels (i.e., potential, achievement, and eminence)? Since nurturing potential is presumably different from nurturing eminence, what should be the goal of psychosocial coaching at each level of talent development? Subotnik et al. (2011) provide some insight:

In the earliest stage, it is the job of the teacher to engage the explicit or undeveloped interests of young people in a topic or domain and to engender and capitalize on motivation. At the next stage of development, it is critical that teachers help the individual to develop the needed skills, knowledge, and values associated with the acquisition of expertise in that domain. The third-stage teacher helps the talented individual develop a niche in the field, a personal style, method or approach, or unique area of application. (p. 33)

As Subotnik et al. suggest, with regard to psychosocial coaching there is a shift that occurs between potential and actual accomplishments, such that, as a child, mentors, teachers, and coaches are provided to the child (such as through public education or through parents seeking out additional assistance and experiences). But, as individuals move out of childhood and into college, graduate school, or a career, mentors must be sought and appropriately used. The critical period in the development of talent is this shift: Once a talent is recognized and nurtured in the beginning stages of talent development, an individual must be motivated and confident enough to pursue his or her talents and further psychosocial coaching. Without this internal drive and belief in oneself, an individual is not likely to become eminent.

In addition to research that examines the psychosocial variables that are most influential in the development of talent, and how to measure them, much more research is needed to understand the types of psychosocial coaching needed at various developmental levels, as well as the effects of psychosocial coaching over time. Psychosocial coaching can occur through parents, teachers, mentors, experts in the field, and others, but I advocate for a broader perspective: therapists, school psychologists, school counselors, psychologists, psychiatrists, and pediatricians need to be *specifically* trained to treat and work with the gifted population. If we truly want to nurture the talent development of gifted individuals, we need to nurture the *whole individual*, including both academic and psychosocial needs.

## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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**Bio**

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