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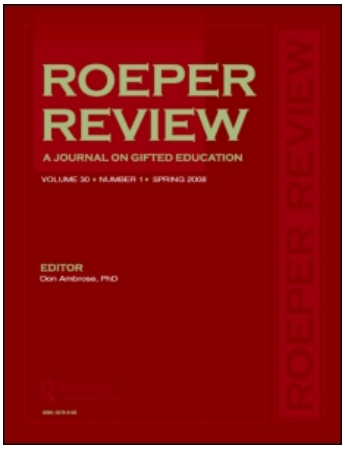

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In Search of the Gifted Identity: *From Abstract Concept to Workable Counseling Constructs*

Andrew S. Mahoney

Knowing one's giftedness and having a well-developed sense of identity as a gifted person are crucial for the development of the self. Many gifted people struggle with their giftedness, what it means to be gifted and how to develop that potential because there are few models available to assist in the identity development and counseling of gifted people. Moreover, identity itself is often viewed as an abstract concept making the task of bridging this concept to pragmatic applications highly challenging. The Gifted Identity Formation Model, presented here, helps bridge the theoretical with the practical, includes identity and its formation as crucial variables in the counseling process, and uses identity as the baseline for intervention. The model aids with assessment and helps deliver counseling related interventions that explore and strengthen the identity and identity formation of gifted people, in turn enhancing the health and development of the self.

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There are many conceptual challenges to understanding the issues related to identify formation in the gifted. One is to understand what goes into the formation of a gifted person's identity. A second, and perhaps more involved challenge rests in the pragmatics of helping foster a healthy and relevant identity for a gifted person. The need for differentiated and specialized counseling services for the gifted is evident throughout the literature (Moon, Kelly & Feldhusen 1997; Treffinger & Feldhusen, 1996; Feldman, 1996; Rocamara, 1992; Alverado, 1989; Coangelo, 1989). Recently, David Feldman (1996) called for an expansion of human development theories to include the unique characteristics and developmental needs of gifted people. However, the problem is there are few differentiated models that counselors, educators, and other professionals can use to help counsel the gifted and to help strengthen the development of an identity integrated with giftedness. The task of integrating an intricate and complex concept such as giftedness or the development of a gifted identity into workable counseling applications offers a multi-faceted challenge.

The Gifted Identity Formation Model is a differentiated counseling model which attempts to bridge the theoretical constructs relating to identity formation in the gifted with the practical aspects of counseling gifted people. For the purposes of this model, giftedness is defined as exceptional ability in a variety of areas such as intellect, the arts and creativity. Giftedness is also viewed as an aspect or as aspects of the self. This article first illuminates the complexity, process and nuances of identity formation relating to the gifted, and then provides an overview of a differentiated model that incorporates identity formation into the counseling process for the gifted population.

Identity and Its Formation

Defining identity may be as complex as developing one's identity; even Eric Erikson (1968) was hesitant to offer a definitive explanation. It may be that the definition includes the unity and integration of all aspects of self, including the conscious and unconscious. It may be that another way to define identity is through answering the question, "who am I?".

If identity encompasses the complexity of all aspects of 'who I am", then identity formation is the process of integrating and shaping discrete pieces of the self into a unique being. Erikson (1968) spoke of identity formation as "a process located in the core of the individual and yet also in the core of his communal culture" (pg. 22). He refers to the integrative and complex relationship between the inner self (all inner aspects and internal interplay of the self) and the outer world (self as it relates and contends with the external world). He described a "few minimum requirements" to consider when contending with the complex process of identity formation. The Gifted Identity Formation Model utilizes these requirements as the working underpinnings of the model:

- identity formation employs a process of simultaneous reflection and observation
- identity formation takes place on all levels of mental functioning
- an individual judges himself in light of what he perceives to be the way others judge him, in comparison to himself, and to a topology significant to others.

Identity formation for Erikson was largely unconscious, indicating how much he believed the inner world of the self influenced identity. He believed the process was "for the most part unconscious except where inner conditions and outer circumstances combine to aggravate a painful or elated identity-consciousness" (p 23). Erikson was referring to what occurs when an individual is not in synch with her true self. For example, even though Mary was told since childhood that she was gifted, she did not view herself as such and was very distressed over her career choice as an adult. She complained constantly that her chosen life's work was not in tune with who she really is, but had no sense on how to redirect herself.

It is also important to keep in mind that Erikson never saw identity as static or unchangeable but believed identity formation was a life-long process. Therefore, the Gifted Identity Formation Model operates under the principle that development and integration of one's giftedness must be accounted for as a variable in the healthy development of the self's identity across the life span.

The Gifted Identity Formation Model

The Gifted Identity Formation Model is a guide for understanding the complexity and nuances of gifted people. It provides a counseling framework that helps gifted individuals to be aware of and to understand the effect their giftedness has on their life development, and the importance giftedness has on their identity formation, thus better understanding themselves as gifted people. The counselor uses the model to assess the complexity surrounding an individual's giftedness and how giftedness is relevant to the healthy or unhealthy development of that individual. The model serves as a guide to design interventions, practices or strategies that facilitate and/or intervene in the counseling process. The model is not meant to be used as

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a criteria scale for mental health or to compare the development of individuals. Rather, it has three primary counseling purposes: serving as an assessment tool, assisting in the development of counseling interventions, and acting as a guide in the counseling process.

The model also provides a context for understanding giftedness as part of the continuum of human behavior. It allows for giftedness to be placed in a positive context of development rather than be mischaracterized as abnormal or pathological. With this framework the counselor is challenged to explore the diverse nature of the gifted self and its importance in the greater scope of human nature.

Using a cross-gridded framework (see Figure 1) of four constructs *(validation, affirmation, affiliation, and affinity)* and twelve systems *(self, family, family of origin, cultural, vocational, environmental, educational, social, psychological, political, organic-physiological, and developmental),* counselors (with their client or independently) explore, discuss and chart the components of identity development exposing giftedness as a variable (see figure 2). For example, when assessing from each construct and system, it is important to explore whether giftedness has or had a value of positive, negative or some manifestation in-between placed on it.

The constructs and systems are differentiated to accentuate the complexity of identity and the identity formation process. By breaking down these variables and aspects of identity formation, the counselor and client manage the complexity and work with identity in a less abstract form. As an overlay, the model can be used with existing counseling frameworks. For example, if the school counselor is conducting a career exploration group, the model provides a differential tool to account for gifted members. The counselor helps these individuals define areas of strength and identify ways to better support areas that need development. Thus, the model can be used for counseling interventions that direct people to be more in tune with their giftedness and demonstrates how their giftedness plays out in work, education, development, and relationships. The intent is to assess and introduce the variability of giftedness in many contexts to support and develop a gifted identity as a part of the whole self.

Systems That Impact the Identity Formation of the Gifted

	CONSTRUCTS			
SYSTEMS	**Validation**	**Affirmation**	**Affiliation**	**Affinity**
Self				
Family				
Family of Origin				
Cultural				
Vocational				
Environmental				
Educational				
Social				
Psychological				
Political				
Organic - Physiological				
Developmental				

Figure 1

	CONSTRUCTS			
SYSTEMS	**Validation**	**Affirmation**	**Affiliation**	**Affinity**
Self				
Family	My parents never once said I was gifted. "I just assumed that I was odd in their eyes."			
Family of Origin				
Cultural				

Jon grew up in a family that never acknowledge his giftedness, he reported for this section of the grid that there was no validation coming from his parents

Jon's self report here would be an example of negative or indifferent validation coming from the family (i e. his parents) in regards to his giftedness

Figure 2

The Four Constructs

The four constructs represent some of the forces or underpinnings that shape and influence identity. These focal points are described and delineated to help the counselor work with the complex nature of identity and how it forms. There is no distinct order for the four constructs, although there may be a stage sequence to them. For example, children are often identified in a formalized manner as gifted before placed in a gifted education program The author encourages the use of these constructs in a fluid way to support the notion that identity is multifaceted, complex, and forever evolving.

Validation

The first construct is **validation,** an acknowledgment that one's giftedness exists as corroborated by others or by oneself. Validation originates from primary relationships such as the self, parents, teachers, institutions and persons in positions of authority. The relationships are primary in that individuals are dependent on these relationships or sources of validation to facilitate their development or growth in some manner.

Giftedness can be validated through identification by an academic gifted program, acknowledgment of ones giftedness by a significant other, and/or by coming to one's own realization through exceptional accomplishments. Keep in mind that the form of validation may also limit how it validates a person. For example, if the child does not meet the eligibility criteria for a gifted program, he may not feel that his giftedness is valid because the school says he is not gifted. Therefore, to facilitate self-understanding, counselors should consider and define a variety of indicators of ability that will assist people in understanding how their gift is valid.

Persons who do not feel their giftedness is valid may suffer from self-esteem problems and low self-concept. If an individual's concept of what is valid giftedness is defined only in a limited manner, how she develops that gift will also be limited.

Another form of validation is reflected in the parents' awareness that the child is gifted. Do they know what giftedness is and do they validate the child in her giftedness by acknowledging and accepting it? If parents know their child is gifted, validation can come through advocating for the child to be in a gifted program, providing an enrichment opportunity or activity where she can understand and develop her behavior from a gifted perspective. Validation then becomes an important marker for giftedness.

Affirmation

Affirmation, the second construct, requires interactive acknowledgment (a seconding of the motion) of who we are from many supportive individuals or processes. It is the *continual reinforcement* of the nuances of an individual's giftedness from learning, experiences, environment, parents, teachers, and enrichment. It is the ongoing, interactive process between

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self as gifted and the world. The process reinforces in the self that "I am gifted".

Affirmation can also be negative from the absence of reinforcement or from negative feedback. A positive example of affirmation is a child's participation in a gifted program that provides ongoing challenge to his ability and continuous positive mirroring around his giftedness. Another example might originate in the *family of origin* (generations of the extended family). Affirmation from this system comes from both the conscious and unconscious value structures that are passed on generationally. For example, in a family in which giftedness in women was not affirmed, and in which the family disapproved of women in higher education for several past generations, the development of intellectual gifts in women may neither be acknowledged nor supported. This exemplifies a negative affirmation. Values such as these are often heavily ingrained in a person's identity and need to be explored and brought to a conscious awareness. The gifted individual who is aided in exploring giftedness, from the aspect of family of origin, is able to create a healthier differentiation of self, and enable the self to integrate its giftedness more fully.

However, awareness alone does not always facilitate growth. At this point the skill of the counselor is needed to intervene and take that awareness further. In the above examples, the construct of affirmation was analyzed with the *Family of Origin, Cultural* and *Educational* systems showing how the model allows for an assessment that naturally leads to exploring other constructs and systems.

Affiliation

Affiliation is an alliance or association with others of similar intensities, passions, desires and abilities. It means being received in fellowship or integrated into a group or society without loss of identity (or the self). Affiliation provides a reason for being by making a pathway towards connecting the self with the communal. The process of individuation relies heavily on affiliation to support the self coming into its own. For optimal development of a gifted identity, the association or alliance must support giftedness. When discussing validation, primary relationships (such as parents, teachers, and authority figures) are the key focus. In affiliation, secondary relationships (i. e., peers, siblings, colleagues, etc.) become highlighted. These relationships enhance the individuation of the self by encouraging separation from the family of origin and from the parent. In this way, affiliation supports individuation and the development of a healthy and whole self. Included in this process is recognition of the need for belonging and feeling that "who I am" has a place and meaning. Gifted affiliation provides a forum in which individuals are appreciated and accepted for their uniqueness. For example, with appropriate affiliations, a gifted child will not have to deny her giftedness in order to make friends.

To affiliate, people need to be valued for who they are — for their uniqueness, talent, specialness, and that they are human beings. Integration begins here. The self experiences others of likeness away from the primary source of validation. The self at this juncture sees giftedness as valid through others and begins to come to a higher level of self-appreciation and acceptance. Affiliating the gifted aspects of self is conceivably one of the strongest methods to relieve the alienation and isolation that gifted people so often feel.

For the gifted adult, affiliation is often difficult. Aside from MENSA, there are few organizations for gifted adults to affiliate with for mutual challenge and support relevant to the development of their giftedness.

The Gifted Identity Formation Model can be used to assess many of the systems that could provide places to affiliate. A work environment could be reorganized so that people of like mind have more opportunity to collaborate vocationally and socially. It is important to keep in mind that affiliations do not have to exclude others. People can be united through subgrouping, such as committee work or conferencing within the workplace.

In a school setting, a counselor or a teacher may want to start a group for talented artists, writers, musicians, that meets periodically rather than viewing gifted affiliation as being appropriate only in the intellectual domain. It is important to create affiliations on the micro level in groups that account for many different abilities. This will help broaden the view of what giftedness is and reduce stereotyping.

Affinity

The fourth construct is **affinity.** It maintains the fire of the self. It is an attraction towards that which nourishes and resembles a mating of souls, spirit and philosophy; not a yearning, but a calling. It has something to do with the soul, a mission, and a sense of purpose in life. There is a deeper and more esoteric meaning involved. Affinity connects the self to the world and the mystery of life.

Often affinity needs are put aside when the identity process is not maximized. Unmet affinity creates anguish, making life more tenuous. "If I can't fulfill my calling, then I will never have a sense of fulfillment and relief from my angst".

Affinity provides for a goodness of fit, for appropriate challenge and stimulation to develop the gifted attributes — what some might consider their quest. Without an awareness of and meeting of affinity needs, the gifted individual often feels powerless and alienated from life and others. Affinity can drive affiliation, it can drive the development of the gift, or relieve the existential angst associated with being gifted. And without meeting affinity needs there is no respite or shelter from the humanness and non-spiritual aspects of this world.

When working with this construct the counselor questions whether the client's affinity (i. e. purpose, meaning or quest) is being met as it relates to her giftedness, passions, goals, and drives that relate to gifted attributes. For instance, a gifted adolescent may have a burning passion to make a social and political contribution for a cause. Someone facilitating this young person's process needs to question how they can assist that encounter with affinity. This construct requires a much deeper look into the self. The affinity of the self may lie unearthed from a lack of validation, affirmation or affiliation or some combination of all three. The person may have the awareness of their affinity but not know the validity of their feelings.

These four constructs — validation, affirmation, affiliation, affinity — represent important building blocks in development of the self. They interface and have an impact with the following 12 systems to help shape and influence identity formation in the gifted.

12 Systems Impacting Identity Formation

These following 12 systems *(self, family, family of origin, culture, vocational, environmental, educational, social, psychological, political, organic-physiological, and developmental)* delineate variables that contribute to the development of the self's identity as a gifted person. They represent and interface with both the internal and external forces that impact

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identity formation. Each system has properties or values that influence the development of individual giftedness.

The Gifted Identity Formation Model requires the counselor and client to understand how each system influences or impacts the identity development for the client because they are the key to personal growth. These systems do and will overlap. The intent of the model is to challenge the counselor and the client to explore in depth what occurs within and among each of these systems as they relate to the client's giftedness.

Self System

The system of the **Self** refers to the individual's values and beliefs, including the internal view of self as a gifted person. It also includes the perception one has of how he is viewed by others. For example, Charles comes into counseling with very low self esteem, suffers from depression and is bored with his career. When asked how he perceives his own giftedness, he reports himself to be of average ability, yet holds a Ph. D. with honors in physics from a highly prestigious university. He has virtually no awareness of his intellectual giftedness. The self view he presents is highly incongruent with the reality of his current and past experience. In this particular case, the client spent most of his career isolated in his work and was caught in the trap of merely performing with his talent (See Figure 3). After exploring more about his gifts, Charles was able to make appropriate life changes based on a better and more suitable understanding of self and his giftedness. It was the counselor's task to begin the process of helping this man understand his giftedness and to create a view of self that he can understand and further develop.

Family System

The **Family** system includes the immediate family, spouse, parents, siblings, children and partners keeping in mind that the immediate family varies in different cultures. The client and counselor, when working with this system, explore how the immediate family interfaces with the giftedness of its members. For example, Sheli's parents recognized her giftedness early on and went to great lengths to provide enrichment.

Systems That Impact the Identity Formation of the Gifted

	CONSTRUCTS			
SYSTEMS	**Validation**	**Affirmation**	**Affiliation**	**Affinity**
Self	"I never perceived myself as gifted"		Much of my work has been done alone I like it better that way"	
Family				
Family of Origin	Charles' self perception is not congruent with his achievements (i e a Ph D in Physics with honors) which should validate his sense of self as gifted		Charles can validate his view of self by his choice to work alone and *without* others to challenge his self perception	
Cultural				
Vocational				
Environmental				
Educational				
Social				
Psychological				
Political				
Organic - Physiological				
Developmental				

Figure 3

Family of Origin System

The **Family of Origin** refers to past generations of the extended family. The values, beliefs, and traditions held by the family of origin play an extensive role in how people experience and contend with their giftedness. A young man wanted to use his gifts for science and written language to become a science fiction writer. He was confused about whether or not this was a respectable choice and had great difficulty finding the freedom to explore this career direction. He thought he would be the first person in his family to use his talent in a non-traditional way. Unconsciously he was separating from a long line of technical engineers and felt he was betraying the past three generations of gifted men who followed a more traditional and conservative route. The client was encouraged to explore further back in his family of origin and located a descendant that was a novelist. He was quite relieved and it helped him separate himself enough from his Family of Origin to pursue his own dream.

Cultural System

The **Cultural** System includes heritage, gender, race, religion and ethnicity. Each variable holds its own set of beliefs, values, and properties regarding what it means to be gifted. Views of giftedness vary from culture to culture and in some may be non-existent.

Vinny's grew up in the Bronx and had a strong working class background. He was faced with the challenge of leaving the culture known to him to pursue a career as a fine artist. He was in counseling with great distress over the transition that he had to make to be successful and pursue his talent. He was reinforced through his culture throughout his formative years that being a fine artist was not an acceptable choice. He felt alone and that he did not have the support of his culture and family. He spent time exploring a lifetime of feelings of alienation because of his giftedness and the values he was taught around his gift.

Vocational System

The **Vocational** System refers to career choice, career development, occupation and the type of vocational exposure an individual experiences. Steve was quite passionate about computers yet his training was limited due to financial hardship and lack of parental support. Vocationally he needed to have more exposure to and knowledge about computers. Through his experience in a counseling group of highly gifted young men he was able to find others with similar ability and passion who were willing to set him up with his own computer system, aiding Steve in fulfilling his vocational interest in the computer field. This is an example of the vocational system interfacing with an opportunity for affiliation (i. e. gifted peers in a counseling group).

Environmental System

The **Environmental** System impacts identity formation by nurturing or not nurturing a person's gifts. This system includes a child's room at home, the cubicle at work, geographic considerations, the raw materials available to be creative—one's surroundings. Does the individual's environment foster that person's ability? For example, Randy was a prodigious artist as a child and frequented the local salvage yard. He was able to find unlimited raw materials for his artistic creations. With a supportive environment at home he could bring his found treasures to his family garage (which served as his studio) and create art. In this example, Randy's environment

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provided him with raw materials at his disposal to be used creatively and thus develop his talents. At the same time, his parents encouraged his endeavors into non-conventional environments (i. e. the local salvage yard).

Educational System

The **Educational** System refers to formal or informal means by which the gifted person is educated, including schools, discussion groups, clubs, individual study, and observation. Working with this system, the counselor needs to explore both traditional and non-traditional educational environments to assist in this area of development. The interface between the Educational System and the identity of a gifted person is critical because of the tendency to define giftedness in an academic context. Society has placed enormous value on academically related giftedness, the criteria for which is set by the traditional academic educational system. Nelson for example, because of his profound ability, was unable to find his traditional educational situation stimulating. He was in his sophomore year of high school and his work had severely declined. His counselor and parents worked on a plan to accelerate him in a few subjects through a local college. The plan also included a mentor who taught Nelson how to do advanced animation techniques on the computer. Things began to turn around and his work improved.

Social System

The **Social** system involves relationships with peers, family, and connecting to others, providing the affiliations needed to develop a healthy identity. Counseling groups offer one form of socialization. David never had the opportunity to talk to a peer about how badly the kids made fun of the things he said. By joining a counseling group of highly gifted eight to ten year old boys, David began to understand how to deal better with the kids at school. He found the group to be a place of safety and support that enabled him to survive in his world.

Psychological System

The **Psychological** system is the system of our psyche where dynamics and experiences come into play and build one's self esteem, self concept and impact how the individual psychologically deals with life. The psychological system also reflects the complexity of defenses and the depth of one's ego and character. The field of psychology is part of the psychological system. For example, how does the field of psychology view and contend with the nature of giftedness? Is giftedness pathologized, ignored or understood for its difference? All too often, a precocious gifted child becomes a marker for unacceptable behavior and yet that behavior may be the raw potential for an exceptional future contribution to the world.

Political System

The **Political** system often dictates values regarding giftedness. Gifted people may fall victim to political agendas. The key is to help the counselor and the client assess and understand how the political climate is related to that client's giftedness. For example, the issue of funding for education or the allocation of resources and opportunities in a workplace are often affected by politics. The most common example is funding for sports programs versus gifted programming.

Organic-Physiological System

The **Organic-Physiological** system explores areas where there is a behavioral or physiological relationship to one's giftedness. Benbow (1986) has shown that some physiological traits occur more frequently in extremely able students. She identified the traits of left or mixed handedness, myopia, and symptomatic atopic disease (asthma and other allergies) among extremely mathematically and verbally precocious students. Such studies raise the question whether giftedness has a physiological basis. The knowledge that giftedness has a physiological connection may help to answer many questions and concerns a gifted person might have in respect to their view of self.

Developmental System

The **Developmental** system encompasses life-cycle changes such as entering adolescence, the birth of a child, individuation and separation from the family. The Developmental system can be used to differentiate how a gifted person's development may be asynchronous with traditional views of development (Silverman, 1998). Juan's parents could not comprehend how he could be so mature and adult-like and suddenly change to exhibit the behaviors of a five year old that he was.

The 12 systems described here have been selected as a cross section of forces that impact the development of a person's identity. The author acknowledges that many systems simultaneously interface and overlap. The intent of breaking down the systems is to encourage the exploration of the complex forces and variables that contribute to identity formation.

Future Considerations

A delicate interplay occurs in the development of a gifted person's identity. How an individual integrates and develops his giftedness has ramifications for his life span. Our responsibility as professionals is to help the gifted individual learn about variations in ability and how that variance is to be integrated with "who I am" as a whole self which includes one's giftedness. Without the appropriate context for understanding identity formation for gifted people, their needs may not be met. A richness exists in this exceptional force or dance within the self that can benefit from the kind of exploration this model provides.

This differentiated counseling model is offered as a starting place, a point of discussion as the field of gifted embarks on new ways to expand views about the development of gifted people. The model is open for review, to be enhanced and challenged. The intent here is to show a qualitative extraction and synthesis of the author's extensive clinical work, utilizing the construct of giftedness in the development of self and to share that piece with others.

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