

Heightened Multifaceted Sensitivity of Gifted Students:

Implications for Counseling

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Effective psychological counseling of gifted students is enhanced when mental health professionals have knowledge of gifted people's differentiating characteristics. This article focuses on heightened multifaceted sensitivity (HMS), a conception of sensitivity that is used by the author in counseling gifted students and their parents. HMS is described, and its implications for counseling gifted students are presented.

Research on the personality and self-concept of gifted students suggests that they, as a group, are well adjusted (e.g., Czeschlik & Rost, 1994; Nail & Evans 1997; Olzewski-Kubilius, Kulieke, & Krasney, 1988; Pyryt & Mendaglio, 1994). However, those gifted students with a variety of adjustment problems who are referred for psychological counseling tend to challenge even the most experienced helping professionals. Parents and teachers often describe these students as being emotionally volatile and prone to overreactions, and their counselors may witness emotional outbursts firsthand. The affective differentiating characteristics (Clark, 1997; Karnes & Bean, 2001) of these clients may generate a great deal of negative emotion in their lives. Their giftedness seems to contribute to the intensity of their negative emotional expressions, and these negative emotions, at times expressed in explosive ways, shroud typical reasons for referral, such as academic underachievement and defiance of authority. To work effectively with these clients, counselors need more than general counseling knowledge and skills—they need to understand how unique features of giftedness contribute to the problems. This article describes how their heightened sensitivity, an affective characteristic of the gifted (e.g., Coleman, 1996; Coleman & Cross, 2001; Lovecky, 1992; Nugent, 2001; Parke, 1989; Webb, 2000), conceptualized as heightened multifaceted sensitivity, contributes to their emotionality.

Defining Sensitivity for Use in Counseling: Reflecting Common Themes and Addressing Issues

Many usages of the word *sensitivity* appear in various contexts other than gifted education. For example, we encounter multicultural sensitivity (Hunter & Elias, 1999), environmental sensitivity (Kwallek, Woodson, Lewis, & Sales, 1997), and heightened sensitivity to the effects of pharmaceuticals (Hutchison, Wood, & Swift, 1999). Sensitivity also appears in discussions of attributes of other populations of exceptional people. For example, heightened sensitivity to tactile, auditory, or visual stimuli has been associated with Gilles de la Tourette's syndrome (Cohen & Leckman, 1992), autism (Link, 1997), and Asperger's Syndrome (Atwood, 1998). Gifted children may demonstrate environmental and multicultural sensitivities, as well as sensitivity to certain pharmaceuticals. Gifted children may also manifest sensory sensitivities, as do other exceptional children. Neihart (2000) illustrated this latter point in a discussion comparing children with Asperger's Syndrome (AS) to those who are gifted:

Hypersensitivity to sensory stimuli is also not uncommon in both groups of children. Parents of gifted and AS [Asperger's Syndrome] children alike often can tell

stories of their child's adamant refusal to wear certain kinds of materials, to eat foods of a certain texture, to recoil or run at the sound of noises they find particularly abrasive, or to refuse some kinds of touch. (p. 223)

These uses of sensitivity, some of which may be applicable to gifted children, are quite distinct from the use of the word in the model of heightened sensitivity proposed here.

Other uses of sensitivity that are found in common discourse, and in Aron's (1996) description of the highly sensitive person, are salient to the proposed model of heightened sensitivity. In daily usage, *sensitive* is often used to describe someone whose feelings are easily hurt; the descriptor *too* is often implicit in this use, conveying a negative connotation. This use of the term, though limited in scope, is deemed relevant because of its association with emotionality. Aron's description of highly sensitive people (HSPs) also contains some elements that bear on a person's emotionality.

HSPs are those people who have inherited a sensitive nervous system (Aron, 1996, p. ix). The nucleus of high sensitivity for Aron is arousability of the nervous system:

People differ considerably in how much their nervous system is aroused in the same situation, under the same stimulation. . . . The difference is very real and normal. In fact, it can be observed in all higher animals—mice, cats, dogs, horses, monkeys, and humans. Within a species, the percentage that is very sensitive to stimulation is usually about the same, around 15–20. (p. 6)

For Aron, high sensitivity is associated with various traits, including being better at spotting and avoiding errors; highly conscientious; able to concentrate deeply; especially good at tasks requiring vigilance, accuracy, speed, and the detection of minor differences; able to think about one's own thinking; and deeply affected by other people's moods and emotions. She also included how HSPs are different physically. HSPs are specialists in fine motor movements, good at holding still, "morning people," more affected by stimulants like caffeine, more right brained, and more sensitive to things in the air. High sensitivity of HSPs ranges from tactile sensitivity, to compassion and empathy. Due to the sensitivity of their nervous systems, HSPs react to subtle stimuli and have a longer recovery time than non-HSPs (Aron, 1996, pp. 10–11). An important downside of high sensitivity lies in HSPs responses to stimulation: "What is *moderately* arousing for most people is highly arousing for HSPs. What is *highly* arousing for most people causes an HSP to become very *frazzled* indeed" (p. 7, italics in original).

Aron's descriptions of HSPs are quite similar to discussions of sensitivity and heightened sensitivity in gifted education ref-

erences. She, in fact, mentioned giftedness in her discussion of HSPs. It appears that some of the participants in her case study research (on which her book is based) were enrolled in gifted education programs during their school years. The model of sensitivity that was developed by the author for application in the counseling process does not focus on sensory sensitivities; rather, it incorporates such factors as "thinking about one's thinking" and "deeply affected by other people's moods and feelings" that are seen both in Aron's work and in gifted education.

A review of descriptions of sensitivity among gifted people conducted several years ago (Mendaglio, 1995) revealed themes that continue to be evident in more recent literature (e.g., Coleman & Cross, 2001; Davis & Rimm, 1998; Nugent, 2000). Far from being a characteristic that refers only to one's feelings being easily hurt, sensitivity is usually described with awareness or perceptiveness at its core. This awareness is directed at self and others. Gifted people are described as having keen awareness of both cognitive and emotional content in self and others.

Another point of agreement is the need to use descriptors such as *heightened* or *greater* when referring to sensitivity of the gifted (e.g., Clark, 1997, Lovecky, 1992; Roeper, 1982; Silverman, 1993). Implicit in these depictions of sensitivity is the notion that the gifted possess or display more sensitivity—they are more aware of themselves and the their social environments—than their nongifted counterparts.

In addition to these common themes, two issues are implicit in some descriptions of sensitivity: positive bias and its relation to emotions. There are positive outcomes of sensitivity. For example, Piechowski (1997) stated that "Instances of empathy, unselfishness and consideration for others are readily found among gifted children" (p. 369). However, discussions of sensitivity of the gifted at times have a value-laden flavor, as in sensitivity as "emotional giftedness" (Roeper, 1982), "moral sensitivity" (Silverman, 1994), the gifted as "sensitive and compassionate" (Lovecky, 1992), and "spiritual sensitivity" (Lovecky, 1998). While there is little doubt that some—perhaps the majority—of gifted people display these traits, such descriptions are not universally applicable to the gifted population. To assume that the construct "giftedness" is equated with altruism and moral behaviors runs counter to the experiences of some parents and educators of children and adolescents in gifted education programs. Moreover, current events and history present many illustrations of individuals who meet the criteria for giftedness, especially intellectual giftedness, but whose behaviors were immoral and atrocious.

The descriptions of sensitivity referred to above appear to equate sensitivity with emotions. To be sensitive is to be emotional. However, terms used in descriptions of sensitivity such as *self-awareness*, *perceptiveness*, and *empathy* are not synonyms

for emotion. These are processes that often lead to emotions, but are not emotions themselves. Distinguishing between emotion-generating processes and emotions themselves is necessary for a definition of sensitivity that can be applied systematically in counseling.

A great deal of counselors' time is spent dealing with emotionality in clients. Clients' emotionality cannot be equated with concepts such as sensitivity. Sensitivity needs to be defined in such a way that its relationship to clients' emotions is specified. Being sensitive is not being emotional; it is a source of emotion. For gifted people, heightened sensitivity has the potential of creating intense negative emotionality often described by parents and occasionally witnessed by counselors.

A conception of sensitivity useful in counseling gifted students should reflect the prevailing consensus around the concept, while addressing issues implicit in many conceptions of sensitivity. Awareness directed at self and others is one aspect of sensitivity that is commonly accepted. That the focus of sensitivity is both thinking and feeling in nature is another. Sensitivity contributes to an understanding of ourselves and others through our awareness of the thoughts and feelings both we and others experience. A descriptor such as *heightened* is needed when applying sensitivity to gifted people since it is presumed that, while all people are sensitive, gifted people possess more of this ability. Conceiving of sensitivity as awareness, a cognitive process, lends support to the expectation that gifted people will have more of this process.

A conception of sensitivity useful in counseling should also be neutral or double-edged in nature. Counselors often encounter giftedness "gone awry," which is often manifested in academic underachievement and sometimes as verbal and physical abuse of others. Having a view of sensitivity as exclusively moral or compassionate would be of limited use in counseling gifted students. A perspective on sensitivity that allows for both positive and negative outcomes is more useful in understanding both well-adjusted gifted students and those who are maladjusted.

Counselors need a model of sensitivity that can be used to direct aspects of the counseling process with gifted people. Such a model must provide an elaborated conception of sensitivity. It should reflect the complexity of the concept and be conceived in such a way that its relationship to emotionality can be specified. Since "heightened sensitivity" is needed to define the sensitivity of gifted people, the model must first address "sensitivity."

Multifaceted Perspective of Sensitivity

A multifaceted view of sensitivity (Mendaglio, 1995) forms a conceptual foundation for a model of sensitivity. *Multifaceted sensitivity* is a concept derived from various descriptions of sen-

sitivity in gifted people and observations made by the author in the course of counseling gifted people of varying ages. As with the many descriptions currently available, awareness is at the core of this multifaceted perspective. Sensitivity is awareness of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of self and others (Mendaglio, 1995). This view of sensitivity concerns itself with the process of knowing and understanding the internal states of both self and others. As such, it is distinct from other usages of sensitivity, such as environmental sensitivity and sensitivity to various sensory inputs as described by Aron (1996).

Sensitivity is a combination of cognitive and related affective processes applied to self and others that create emotions and assist in constructing the meaning of one's internal states, as well as those of other people. The ability to focus attention inward is essential for self-knowledge. Introspection leads to awareness of one's mental and emotional states. When directed toward self, sensitivity is metacognitive—awareness of one's own cognitive processes. Directed at others, it goes beyond the information available to us—other-oriented sensitivity is inferential in nature. A critical difference between sensitivity directed at self versus other people is the availability of information. We have direct access to our own internal states; we have the potential to know ourselves from the inside. Our visceral and mental activities are accessible. We do not have such access to other people. Our knowledge of the "insides" of others comes from their self-disclosure and conclusions we draw as a result of our interaction with them. Self-oriented sensitivity is largely a metacognitive process, relying on interpretation of internal cues; other-oriented sensitivity, largely an inferential process, is supplemented by their self-disclosure.

Behavioral observations play an important role in multifaceted sensitivity. Observations of our behaviors and those of others provide the bases for generating inferences about the internal states of self and others. Through self-observation, we focus our attention on ourselves using the same processes as we do with perceiving people. As a result, we are in a position to make inferences about our own behaviors. Coupling our inside knowledge with inferences based on self-observation enhances our self-understanding. In other-oriented multifaceted sensitivity, other people's verbal and nonverbal behaviors are essential for creating our knowledge of them. To arrive at conclusions about their internal states, such as emotions and motivations, we engage in inference making by using our observations of them as the raw data. Inferences, by their very nature, are hypotheses or guesses. Our abilities to observe behaviors and draw conclusions that are tied to those observations contribute to the validity of the understanding we construct regarding others. Cognitive products of sensitivity, especially those emanating from other-oriented sensitivity, are colored by our abilities to observe behaviors and generate inferences anchored to those observations.

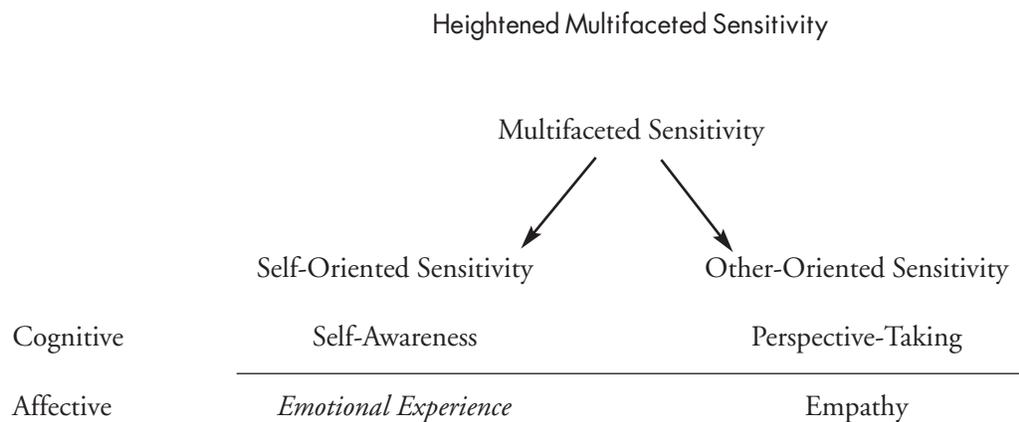


Figure 1. Multifaceted sensitivity. Four facets reflecting the foci self-other; and, the cognitive and affective contents. Emotional Experience is italicized to contrast it with the other three facets that operate to generate emotions.

Accuracy of understanding is not synonymous with sensitivity, whether heightened or not. Self- or other-oriented sensitivity does lead to incorrect conclusions from time to time. Superior intellectual ability is no guarantee that inferences are always right. There are opportunities for us to be “bad scientists” when it comes to guesses we make about others’ emotional states, attitudes, and intentions. Similarly, we can misinterpret the meaning of our visceral cues and thought processes. There are opportunities for errors in what we observe (e.g., selectively attending to some behavioral cues) that then influence our hypotheses about the issues in question. We may also err in not taking the time to test the hypotheses we generate. As “good scientists,” we know that hypotheses need additional data to assess them—to confirm or disconfirm them. Accuracy of the cognitive products of sensitivity—understanding of self and others—does not spontaneously follow simply because we are using sensitivity. A challenge to all, but especially to those who possess heightened sensitivity, is accepting that their initial, often spontaneous, conclusions about the internal states of others and self need verification. Hypotheses are not laws.

A multifaceted view of sensitivity represents this concept as a cognitive process, which is directed at others and self. Using behaviors and direct access to internal cues, people draw conclusions about other people and themselves. To reflect its complexity, sensitivity is conceived as a matrix containing four facets. Each facet refers to a cognitive and affective focus of self- and other-oriented sensitivity. In labeling these facets, coining new words was deliberately avoided (see Figure 1).

For each facet, an existing term that most closely reflects that aspect of sensitivity was selected. To refer to other-oriented facets of sensitivity, *perspective-taking* and *empathy* were selected. To reflect self-oriented sensitivity, *self-awareness* and *emotional experience* were the choices.

Perspective-Taking and Empathy: Sensitivity Focused on Others

Multifaceted sensitivity directed at others refers to our being aware of their behaviors, emotions, and cognitions. Perspective-taking and empathy are facets of sensitivity that concern themselves with cognitive and affective dimensions, respectively. Perspective-taking is the process by which we imagine what others are thinking and feeling (Berk, 1989), and it leads to *understanding* people’s cognitions and emotions. Role-taking is also used to describe the process by which we come to understand other people (e.g., Hoffman, 2000). Through perspective-taking, we infer others’ motivations, intentions, and thinking. We also understand what emotions they are experiencing. In perspective-taking, the objectives are cognitive in nature. Through this facet of sensitivity, we approximate the points of view of other people as a result of our processing information gleaned from our interactions with them. We come to understand their meaning making, motivations, or intentions and emotions.

In contrast to the understanding of emotions in perspective-taking, through empathy we *experience* other people’s emotions (Denham, 1998; Hoffman, 2000). Empathy refers to a vicarious experiencing of another person’s emotions. In young children, this often takes the form of emotional contagion: One child begins crying in a daycare or kindergarten and others cry, as well. Older students may feel other children’s or adolescents’ negative or positive emotions as they observe their fellow students’ emotional expressions in various school situations.

While perspective-taking and empathy are different, they often operate in concert. Understanding another person’s perspective often leads to a vicarious experiencing of associated emotions. An empathic connection to another person’s emotions may trigger perspective-taking: Sensing another person’s pain motivates us to understand him or her further.

Since empathy has a multiplicity of meanings and is represented in various ways in gifted education, some additional comments are required to characterize adequately empathy as one aspect of multifaceted sensitivity. As a facet of sensitivity, empathy is a process. It is not the feeling state itself; that is, one feels sadness because of the empathic process. When children observe other people in distress and feel upset themselves, what we see is not empathy. We see behavioral manifestations of emotional expression: We see tears welling up in children's eyes and other facial expressions indicating sadness or distress. Behaviors reflective of emotionality are observable; however, we do not see empathy, which is a covert process leading to emotional experience and expression. A second point is particularly relevant for counselors. Empathy, as used in multifaceted sensitivity, is not the empathy with which they are likely familiar. For most counselors, empathy is associated with the dual process of understanding a client from his or her point of view and communicating that understanding appropriately. It is a counseling tool that, among other things, facilitates the development of a counseling relationship. Empathy, as emotional contagion and experiencing of another's emotions is akin to its usage in developmental psychology (e.g., Saarni, 1999). Counselors may, in the process of interviewing clients, feel what their clients feel, but the intent of empathy in counseling is not vicarious experiencing of emotions. For counselors, empathy is a process by which they understand their clients. Perspective-taking, with the addition of a communication dimension, more closely resembles the definition of empathy in counseling. An essential ingredient in many approaches to counseling is understanding the client from his or her own frame of reference, including their thoughts and feelings. The emphasis is on understanding, not experiencing, another's emotions. If the counselor routinely experiences clients' intense negative emotions and moods, counseling effectiveness will suffer. If a counselor is empathically connected—in the sense of empathy as a facet of sensitivity—with, for example, a severely depressed client, the result will likely be two depressed people in the counseling session. Counselors' task in this regard is to find that balance between concern for their clients and emotional detachment, the latter enabling them to direct the counseling process effectively.

Self-Awareness and Emotional Experience: Sensitivity and Self

Self-directed sensitivity is awareness of our behaviors, cognitions, and emotions. Self-sensitivity rests on the general cognitive ability by which we make ourselves the objects of our awareness. Such "objective self-awareness" (Duval & Wicklund, 1972) enables consciousness of a broad spectrum of internal stimuli. Whether the focus is our thinking or emo-

tions, being the object of our attention is required for obtaining knowledge about them. In multifaceted sensitivity, objective self-awareness is further differentiated into the two facets of self-awareness and emotional experience. Experiencing of emotional states is sufficiently different from the awareness of other internal stimuli such that it warrants special attention.

Emotional experience as used in multifaceted sensitivity is borrowed from the work of Lewis (2000) on emotion. Lewis provided a definition of emotional experience that captures the essence of self-oriented sensitivity with respect to the affective aspect of objective self-awareness:

Emotional experience is the interpretation and evaluation by individuals of their perceived emotional state and expression. Emotional experience requires that individuals attend to their emotional states (i.e., changes in their neurophysiological behavior), as well as the situations in which the changes occur, the behaviors of others, and their own expressions. (p. 272)

Emotional experience begins with our being conscious of our emotional states. In addition to this awareness, the cognitive processes of interpretation and evaluation are involved. In this definition, a distinction is made among emotional expression, emotional states, and emotional experience. In Lewis' (2000; Lewis & Michalson, 1983) conception of emotions, emotional states and their overt expression can exist without experience of them. For emotional experience to occur, we must, according to Lewis, attend to our emotional states and the context in which they occur. Without our awareness of neurophysiological changes, we cannot engage in their interpretation and evaluation. Similarly, a lack of awareness of our emotional expression (e.g., observable changes in our facial expressions, tone of voice, body language) and the behaviors of other people involved, arrests emotional experience. Emotional experience, then, is a hybrid process of intrapersonal and interpersonal awareness that includes other cognitive processes of interpretation and evaluation.

Self-awareness and emotional experience, as facets of sensitivity, are similar and distinct. Self-awareness is awareness of our cognitions and behaviors; emotional experience is reserved for awareness of our emotions. In contrast to emotional experience, processes of interpretation and evaluation are not inherent to self-awareness. We may become aware of internal stimuli without engaging in their interpretation or evaluation. To be sure, self-awareness often leads to these processes. For example, through self-awareness we become conscious of what we do (behavior), which enables us to determine why (interpretation) we do it. In contrast, the self-awareness inherent in emotional experience by necessity requires interpretation and evaluation

to make it so. In the case of emotions, awareness of physiological sensations of emotional states is essential, but not sufficient for experiencing of emotion to occur. These sensations and the context in which they occur need interpretation and evaluation to result in emotional experience. Awareness, however, is the root that emotional experience shares with self-awareness.

Multifaceted Sensitivity and Development

Perspective-taking, empathy, self-awareness, and emotional experience are all influenced by development. Since the facets of multifaceted sensitivity (MS) are derived from cognitive and developmental psychology, contributions in those areas can be used to illuminate the impact of development on MS. For the perspective-taking facet, as an example, the stages of perspective-taking (see Berk, 1997) are one place to begin. A discussion of the facets of MS in a developmental context is beyond the scope of this paper.

Multifaceted Sensitivity: Covert, Coordinated Emotion Generator

Multifaceted Sensitivity (MS) consists of perspective-taking, empathy, self-awareness, and emotional experience. Awareness forms the foundation of this conception of sensitivity, and, therefore, MS is primarily a covert process. An implication of this view is that sensitivity may be present whether we see it or not. In fact, observers do not see MS as such; what we see is its expression. Expression of sensitivity is not a facet of MS; the dimension of expression will be discussed later in this article.

In daily life, the facets of sensitivity operate singly or in various combinations. All four facets may be triggered in a social situation. Through perspective-taking and empathy, a person becomes aware of another's attitudes and emotions that lead to empathy, a vicarious experiencing of that person's emotions. Such interactions may lead to self-awareness of some aspect of one's own situation or personality. During solitary times, we may engage in self-awareness with accompanying emotional experiences as we reflect on, for example, our handling of daily events. While the facets of sensitivity can be described as separate processes, they tend to act in a coordinated manner.

The most important implication of multifaceted sensitivity for counselors is its relevance for emotionality (See Figure 2). Three of the four facets—empathy, perspective-taking, and self-awareness—create emotions in us by interactions with various internal and external stimulus events. Empathy, by definition, results in emotions sensed in other people. Perspective-taking and self-awareness are cognitive processes

that lead to both understanding and emotion. Through perspective-taking, we make inferences about others' attitudes, especially those toward us. For children and adolescents, their perceptions of significant adults' attitudes toward them are an important factor in their own emotions and moods. Through perspective-taking, we can gain a deeper understanding of the person and we may be negatively affected by our perception of his or her negativity toward us.

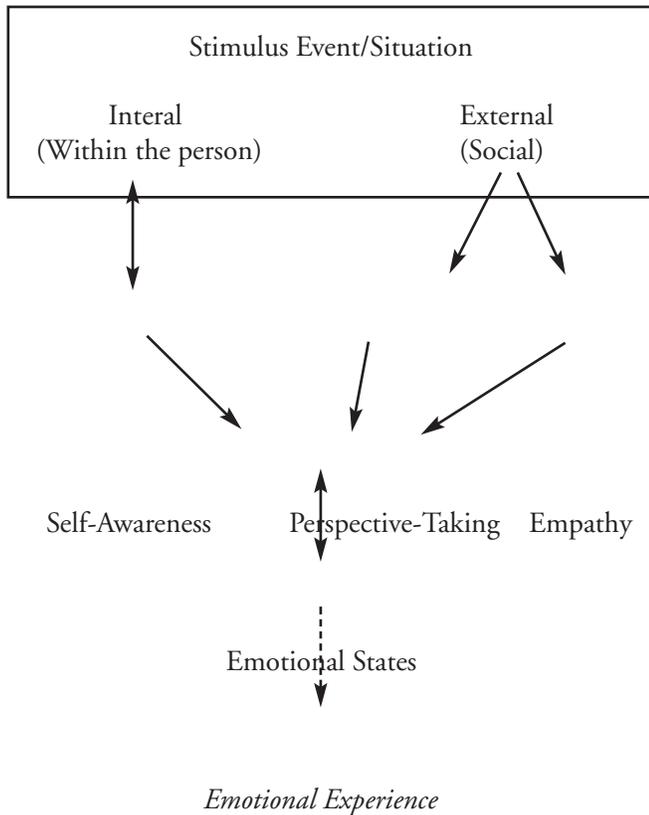
Perspective-taking leads to positive and negative results. It may trigger vicarious emotional experiencing (empathy): We feel emotions even though we did not experience the stimulus events that led to the emotions of the other person. Through self-awareness, we may become conscious of some aspect of our behavior or thinking that we deem problematic, and negative emotions ensue.

While perspective-taking, empathy, and self-awareness create emotions, emotional experience is the ability to perceive emotional states. It enables us to identify what we feel and label our emotions. The use of italics in Figure 2 denotes the difference between emotional experience and the other facets. The other facets interacting with various stimulus events. Emotional experience is illustrated by thoughts such as "I am happy" and "I am sad" and awareness of the respective physiological signals associated with such emotions. Consciousness of these emotion-related thoughts and sensations and labeling them are at the core of emotional experience.

Whether we express our emotions will depend on many factors, including our cultural context, how we were socialized with respect to the rules of emotional expression, and situational factors. Expression of our emotions is facilitated by emotional experience; however, emotional experience does not lead automatically to expression of emotion. Emotional expression is *not* a facet of MS. It is added to Figure 2 to emphasize the distinctiveness of emotional experience and emotional expression.

Heightened Multifaceted Sensitivity: Gifted People and Sensitivity

In gifted people, due to their superior intellectual ability, multifaceted sensitivity, conceptualized as awareness (a cognitive process), appears in a heightened form. In the absence of empirical work in the area of sensitivity (Piechowski, 1999), literature in gifted education and other fields has been drawn upon to develop MS. In gifted education, support for heightened multifaceted sensitivity is found in theoretical/prescriptive literature supporting its discrete facets. These include heightened self-awareness (Clark, 1997), perspective-taking, and empathy (Roeper, 1982). Emotional experience, as a facet of MS, is implicit in emotional giftedness (Piechowski, 1997)



Emotional Expression

Figure 2. Multifaceted Sensitivity and Emotional States,

that often describes the intensity of gifted people's experiencing of emotions. Heightened multifaceted sensitivity is an intense awareness of behaviors, thinking, and emotions of self and others.

A basic assumption in the multifaceted view of sensitivity is that it is associated with intelligence. Gifted people characterized by superior intelligence are expected to have higher multifaceted sensitivity than others with less intellectual ability. In effect, this means that MS is hypothesized as a continuous variable (i.e., appearing in varying levels in the general population) tied to intelligence. Aron (1996) appears to have taken a similar position on the occurrence of sensitivity in the general population. She indicated that approximately 15–20% of the population are HSPs (as noted earlier in this article). She referred to HSPs and non-HSPs, thus suggesting a dichotomous approach to high sensitivity, although sensitivity as appearing in varying levels in the population is implicit in her discussion. In her perspective, sensitivity is described in terms of arousability of the nervous system; presumably, a person's level of sensitivity becomes greater with increases in this inherited

arousability. In the MS model of sensitivity, MS is associated with intelligence. The model, then, predicts that sensitivity in gifted people is heightened multifaceted sensitivity (HMS).

HMS is assumed to be innate to gifted people. The social environment affects and shapes HMS, especially in terms of its expression. But, the environment does not create HMS. It is part and parcel of giftedness. In this way, HMS differs significantly from high levels of sensitivity that are environmentally generated, such as hypervigilance observed in abused children (e.g., Frankel, Boetsch, & Harmon, 2000).

It must be underscored at this point that HMS does not make gifted people better people. There are positive outcomes associated with facets of HMS, such as compassion, altruism (Roepel, 1982), and personal development (Piechowski, 1991). However, as noted earlier, sensitivity is not a synonym for goodness. Very intelligent people have used their intelligence for evil purposes. Gifted and talented artists have engaged in self-destructive behaviors, sometimes leading to suicide.

Furthermore, HMS is not equated with accurate perception and interpretation of others or self. Inferences about internal states of others are just that: guesses, hunches, or hypotheses. Furthermore, gifted people's HMS can create needless negative emotionality for themselves as a result of, for example, misinterpretation of another's intentions. People with superior intellectual ability have HMS that can help others and themselves or, alternatively, harm others and themselves.

Application to Counseling Gifted Students and Parents: The Experience-Expression Dimension of HMS

HMS generates emotions that are experienced, but not necessarily expressed. When expressed, the form may or not be appropriate. Understanding the experience-expression dimension is useful in counseling since it enables counselors to understand some situations at a deeper level. Some counseling vignettes illustrate this. While there are many positive manifestations of HMS, its "dark side" is the focus here since constructive, growthful sides of HMS do not form the basis for referral of gifted people to psychologists and psychiatrists.

HMS and Parents of Gifted Adolescents: Experienced, But Not Expressed

In the course of counseling a gifted male adolescent, the author conducted interviews with his parents. The task at hand was a discussion of parental inconsistency and the importance of consistency in their reactions to their son. Jane (the mother) was being critical of Harry's (the father) lack of involvement in parenting the adolescent. Harry remained silent, but his

discomfort was evident in his nonverbal behaviors. In an attempt to draw Jane's attention to his distress, the following interchange occurred:

Counselor: I think that Harry is a very sensitive person.

Jane (Mother): [Gales of Laughter] You must be kidding! Harry?

Harry: [Silent, tears well up in his eyes]

Jane's response demonstrated a commonsense view of sensitivity that it includes expression of feelings or that it means compassion or concern. If it is not expressed, it is not part of that person's makeup. More importantly, lack of expression led Jane to believe that Harry was unemotional. In the follow-up discussion, both agreed that Harry, in his interaction with family members, did not express feelings except for infrequent, short-lived angry overreactions. Harry had learned over the years that expression of his sensitivity was not acceptable; he learned to cope with HMS by suppression and denial of emotional expression. Since emotions are a daily reality, when they reached a threshold of intensity, emotions would come out of Harry in an explosive manner. Jane, operating under a tacit assumption regarding expression and sensitivity, had little choice but to believe that Harry was a very insensitive person. Describing Harry as "very sensitive" was so discrepant to her experience with him that it led to laughter. A discussion of HMS was used to assist them in achieving two interrelated objectives. For Jane, HMS gave her a new perspective on Harry and emotionality; for Harry, it formed the basis for becoming more emotionally expressive at home. In turn, achievement of these objectives facilitated greater consistency in their parenting of their son.

HMS and Young Children: Expression

A mother who was in counseling seeking better ways of handling her child's misbehavior said the following:

Jackie [5-year-old] is very sensitive. When I'm in a bad mood, like when I have a particularly bad day at work, I do my best to keep it from my daughter. But, she knows something is wrong and she gets very angry with me. She wants me to be in a good mood around her.

With Jackie and her mother, "what Jackie feels is what you get." She was aware of her mother's bad mood despite her mother's attempt to hide it. However, Jackie's expression of HMS was not altruistic: She was concerned with her mother's well-being only to the extent that it impinged on Jackie. In terms of HMS, Jackie used other-oriented sensitivity: She felt her mother's distress. Its expression was transformed by her egocentrism.

Helping the mother understand her daughter's behavior from this perspective resulted in having a less negatively toned home environment by the mother's monitoring her own mood when she approached Jackie.

George, age 8, was identified as gifted through an intellectual assessment conducted because of his parents' concerns about his "extreme sensitivity." His parents' expressed concerns with George's behavior, especially at school, illustrate a commonly held view of sensitivity: being too easily hurt. His parents described George as a very sensitive boy who cried easily. For example, when he forgot his lunch or some item that the school required that day, it was not unusual for him to break down in tears in his classroom or on the playground. His emotional expressiveness was seen as age-inappropriate and elicited teasing from some of his classmates. Teachers, playground supervisors, secretarial staff, and administrators all did their utmost to reassure him, but it was to no avail. Such episodes invariably resulted in calls to Mother, who changed from full- to part-time work because of the frequency and intensity of these episodes. George felt emotions very intensely. At those instances, such as when he realized that he forgot his homework, all facets of HMS were strongly engaged.

With a very sensitive child, parents need a way to understand his or her reactions. An HMS interpretation provides a framework for distraught parents who have tried a variety of interventions without success. With George, both parents were highly stressed from factors outside their family. In addition, there was a great deal of tension because of their worry about George and disagreements regarding methods of intervention. A turning point in counseling occurred when HMS was used to underscore how very sensitive children are deeply affected by tension and conflict detected in parents. By focusing their attention on how George's other-directed sensitivity resulted in a vicarious experiencing of their emotions and moods, they were motivated to reduce the tension around George. With no other intervention, the frequency of George's emotional outbursts declined significantly. This set the stage for use of other strategies.

HMS and Adolescents: Expression

In adolescents, modes of expression range from tantrum-like outbursts reminiscent of childhood, to assertively communicated expression of their views of authority figures.

Susan's (age 13) parents sought counseling because of their concerns with her academic underachievement and disruptive behaviors at home. Her parents, especially her mother, were intensely worried about Susan's academic achievement. It seems that Susan's procrastination had increased significantly during the past 2 years. Since she completed assignments at the last minute, their quality suffered. As the demands on her at school

have progressively increased, her parents saw a decline in her marks. Her parents knew that their intellectually gifted daughter could perform at a higher level. Their discussions aimed at encouraging Susan often resulted in emotions escalating, with both Susan and her parents expressing frustration and anger. Her approach to schoolwork became a source of intense negative emotions for her parents. Both her mother and father described how upset they became when they thought about this in the course of daily living. While her father was equally concerned, her mother bore the emotional brunt since she was the one who routinely monitored Susan's school performance, including fielding calls from school.

Because her mother was implicitly designated as the person responsible for Susan, she became the focus of Susan's wrath. Her mother described a disturbing pattern of interaction that developed between her and Susan regarding schoolwork. Whenever she asked Susan about school, it often deteriorated into a boisterous argument with outbursts of anger and frustration directed at each other. As Susan's academic underachievement persisted, virtually all mother-daughter interactions began to deteriorate. Susan got angry at trivial things that were unassociated with school.

HMS was used to interpret these patterns of behaviors that evolved between Susan and her parents. Using "heightened sensitivity" to describe Susan's behaviors drew an expected startle response from her parents. "*Sensitivity* is not exactly the word we would use to describe her!" they each said in their own way. For them, sensitivity meant crying easily, wearing our heart on our sleeve, and being aware of and responsive to others' feelings. They were told that HMS might be expressed in those ways, but that it has other manifestations as well. After defining HMS for them, the following interpretation was given. Susan's parents became tense around Susan because of their intense worry about her underachievement. Susan sensed that tension even though her parents tried to mask it. The vicarious experiencing of their tension was added to her own anxiety that emanated from her self-awareness. Susan was aware of her own abilities and past school performances. She knew that the quality of her schoolwork was not reflective of her perceived abilities. As a result, she felt anxiety and worry about her future. These feelings came to the fore when her parents mentioned schoolwork. Simultaneously, she vicariously experienced the emotions of her mother (with whom she interacted more frequently than with her father). During these mother-daughter interactions, accumulation of emotions occurred in Susan. Feelings sensed in her mother were added to those that Susan generated through self-oriented sensitivity. Susan then overreacted, from her mother's perspective. Since Susan did not express her own apprehension and disappointment to her mother, the latter was unaware of these. Her mother believed that Susan did not care about her school performance. This

belief, though untrue, fueled the mother's frustration with Susan.

Seeing no indications of improvement in Susan's school performance, her mother's anxiety generalized. It became an obsession. Her father found some relief because he could escape into his work. Her mother worried constantly. Susan's behaviors (i.e., doing everything but homework) served to intensify her mother's awareness of her concerns regarding Susan. This served to increase the negative emotionality in her mother's system. Regardless of the surface topic of conversation, Susan's other-directed sensitivity detected her mother's tension. Her vicarious experiencing of her mother's undefined, unexpressed distress had a negative impact on Susan's demeanor. The anger or frustration that she expressed was the result of her mother's tension, not the topic of conversation or situation.

Using HMS with Susan's parents, especially her mother, resulted in working toward the objective of reducing her parents' tension around Susan. While this reduced tension was not sufficient to alter the underachievement, it created a calmer home atmosphere. Use of HMS laid the foundation for using various commonly used strategies that helped Susan increase the quality of her schoolwork.

Conclusion

When counseling gifted students, counselors and psychologists should add their knowledge of the students' affective characteristics to sound counseling competencies. Heightened sensitivity is a commonly accepted affective characteristic of gifted people. The concept of heightened multifaceted sensitivity (i.e., not "sensitivity" *per se*) is an elaboration of heightened sensitivity so that it can be used in the counseling process. The author has used HMS to interpret a variety of gifted students' adjustment difficulties. In contrast to other diagnostic and assessment approaches, an advantage to using HMS is that it can be used to direct counseling practice. Unlike other approaches to interpreting gifted children's behaviors, such as the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (American Psychiatric Association, 1994), HMS is directly related to the giftedness construct and does not pathologize gifted students' experiences and behaviors.

HMS is not a problem-solving strategy, but a model of sensitivity developed to assist counselors' understanding of emotionality in their clients. The model was designed to address two issues that emerged from the author's reflections on his counseling experiences. First, it stemmed, in part, from client-expressed need. A second source of inspiration was the need to infuse differentiating characteristics of gifted people into the counseling process used with them. Differentiating

characteristics impact counseling as they do teaching gifted students. For the purposes of counseling, a decision was made to begin with their affective characteristics.

Heightened sensitivity is not the only affective characteristic that can be useful in counseling gifted students. Intensity, self-criticism, and perfectionism are other characteristics that are useful in understanding gifted students who encounter difficulties. The characteristics of gifted people need further attention and articulation such that they can be applied systematically in counseling. For those of us who are concerned with counseling gifted people, our aim should be the development of a theory of assessment and counseling that truly reflects the differentiating characteristics of gifted people of all ages. It is hoped that HMS may provide stimulus for progressing toward that end.

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