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Interview

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Interview

Committed to Helping Gifted Individuals Thrive: An Interview with Dr. Edward R. Amend

Edward R. Amend, Psy. D. 
Interviewed by Tracy L. Cross, Ph.D. 

Tracy L. Cross, Ph.D. spoke with Edward R. Amend, Psy.D., a clinical psychologist who specializes in working with gifted individuals, about his life and experience in the field. Amend has written frequently about the psychological characteristics and needs of this special population and is co-author of *A Parent's Guide to Gifted Children* and *Misdiagnosis and Dual Diagnoses of Gifted Children and Adults: ADHD, Bipolar, OCD, Asperger's, Depression, and Other Disorders*.



Dr. Edward R. Amend

Cross • Please tell us about yourself. Where did you grow up? Where did you go to college? Tell us about your professional life. How did you get interested in serving students with gifts and talents?

Amend • I grew up in Uniontown, a small town in southwestern Pennsylvania, where my parents were self-employed. My dad spent time in the

Army and returned to work in a local factory while putting himself through watch-making school via correspondence courses. He became a certified watchmaker with a degree from the Chicago School of Watchmaking without ever venturing outside of PA. He opened a watch repair shop, and my mother did the bookkeeping for the store, which eventually became three stores in the area. My dad's hobbies were circus- and carnival-related, and I grew up working at festivals and fairs, making and selling (and eating) cotton candy, sno-cones, and popcorn, among many other things. I learned early on what hard work was, and I believe these experiences shaped my life and helped me develop good work habits at a young age.

Neither of my parents went to college, but they expected their three children to attend, and we all earned advanced degrees. I did my undergraduate work at Saint Vincent College (SVC), in Latrobe, PA, a small town often best known for being the original home of Mr. Rogers, Arnold Palmer, and Rolling Rock beer. I played baseball there, while learning more about hard work from the Benedictines. Guided by great professors and many priests at SVC, I majored in psychology and graduated in 1990. That fall, I found my way to graduate school at the School of Professional Psychology (SOPP) at Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio.

At SOPP, I met my mentor (and later colleague and friend), Dr. James Webb. I worked under his supervision at a clinical practicum in the Supporting Emotional Needs of the Gifted (SENG) program and began to learn about gifted children. His first assignment was to read *Guiding the Gifted Child* (Webb et al., 1989), and it resonated with me. I think he also expected me to read every other book ever written on gifted as well, and I gave it my best shot. While there, I counseled and assessed gifted children and led SENG-Model Parent Groups, all under Jim's watchful eye and Dr. Susan Perry-Dyer's supervision. This is when I knew that I'd like to work with gifted and talented individuals.

I completed my training, earning my Doctor of Psychology degree (Psy.D.) in clinical psychology in 1994. My training involved additional clinical practicums, pre-doctoral internship, and postdoctoral training working with both adults and children in several settings, including state mental health facilities, children's hospitals, and outpatient counseling centers. These experiences gave me different lenses from which to view development of both children and adults—something that later became invaluable to working with gifted individuals and their families.

Once I completed my postdoctoral training in northeast Ohio in 1995, I was searching for a different job and hoping to find something in the gifted field. I was still connected with Jim Webb, who had recently retired from SOPP, and SENG had moved to Kent State University, under the direction of another important Jim in my life—Dr. Jim Delisle. Kent State was near my internship and post-doctoral training, and I had the opportunity to learn more about the educational aspects as well as the social and emotional aspects of giftedness from Jim D.

Having no luck finding a place that was looking to hire a recently licensed psychologist to work in the gifted field, I explored other options. I was very close to accepting a job at an adult correctional facility when an interesting thing happened that changed the direction of my career. Jim Webb knew I was looking for a job, and Jim Delisle had recently learned that Dr. Sylvia Rimm, also in northeast Ohio at that time, was looking to expand her Family Achievement Clinic in Cleveland (FAC). She was losing a therapist and seeking someone to help with

assessment, therapy, and supervision of graduate students.

As it turns out Jim, Jim, and Sylvia ran into each other at NAGC in 1995, and I was hired to start on January 1, 1996 at FAC. I was excited to again work more directly and frequently with gifted students, the focus of the practice. Of course, I had encountered gifted students in the various other settings, but hadn't had the opportunity to work consistently with that population in several years. Learning about and implementing Dr. Rimm's Trifocal Model for reversing underachievement was fascinating. In looking back at my career, I reflect often on all of those who taught me so much throughout my professional journey. I was lucky to have such great mentors!

I spent two years working at FAC before following my soon-to-be wife to Kentucky. An experimental psychologist, she had accepted a post-doctoral research position at the University of Kentucky in Lexington. I could not find a job working with specifically with gifted individuals in Kentucky, and I joined a private practice that worked in schools, assessing special needs students. I hoped to expand the practice to include giftedness. This experience increased my understanding of the educational needs of students with health impairments and learning, behavioral, and emotional disabilities, which proved vital to understanding the needs of twice-exceptional learners. Working with gifted individuals was not a primary focus and I knew I needed a change to make that happen.

Cross • *How would you describe your counseling practice?*

Amend • In 2003, I opened Amend Psychological Services, where I began more consistently working with gifted individuals and families, providing counseling, therapy, and assessment. The practice grew and now includes two psychologists, one licensed psychological associate, and one homeschooling consultant. We occasionally have doctoral students from the University of Kentucky rotate through to gain experience in working with gifted students. With the addition of more services, we are now known as The Amend Group, a comprehensive center for psychological, educational, and gifted services. We continue to assess all special needs students, including gifted and twice exceptional students, provide counseling and therapy for individuals and families, and support the needs of parents and homeschoolers through consultation. Personally, I take an eclectic approach to therapy and intervention, using pragmatic interventions to address concerns based on empirically supported intervention whenever possible.

Cross • *What have you found to be the most common issues that students with gifts and talents bring to your practice? What changes have you seen over the years?*

Amend • These days, anxiety is one of the most frequent challenges, but over the years I have seen my share of underachievement, Attention-Deficit / Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), and depression as well. The COVID-19 pandemic created tons of uncertainty for all of us, not just gifted people. This ambiguity created anxiety and many parents, now working from home, began to see the challenges gifted students presented to teachers in a classroom. Requests for evaluation surged as the pandemic continued and parents were helping educate their children at home. They peaked as students returned to classrooms amid more uncertainty and the challenges of returning to a new normal.

In the past few years, I had seen many fewer quick referrals for things like ASD and ADHD, with teachers and other referring professionals doing a nice job of triaging to determine whether there really are impairments or whether gifted interventions can be used to alleviate some concerns. I credit this to the increasing awareness of gifted students' educational, social, and emotional needs among teachers and other professionals who work with these students. Independent consultants and organizations like SENG, the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC), and state gifted associations are reaching more and more, and the virtual platforms that expanded quickly is clearly one of the positives to come out of 2020, as these methods furthered the reach of such organizations. Unfortunately, with many students returning to in-person classrooms after a year of virtual schooling, the number of ADHD referrals in all students, not just gifted ones, has increased sharply in my practice.

Cross • *What topics do you think we can be most effective with in our counseling practice with gifted and talented students?*

Amend • There are empirically based treatments for many of the common presenting issues in counseling or therapy, such as anxiety and depression. Clinicians knowledgeable about giftedness can start with these treatments and adapt them to meet the needs of their individual clients. An understanding of giftedness is imperative to implementing empirically based treatments—in my experience, gifted individuals, as much if not more than others, need to feel understood and accepted. We joke that it only takes one psychologist to change a lightbulb, but that lightbulb must really want to change. With the gifted, a therapist will need to develop a relationship that helps guide the client through the stages of change.

In addition to addressing typical presenting issues like anxiety and depression, counselors and therapists can provide information and resources to the gifted and 2e individual about social and emotional development, educational needs, and personal growth. Knowledge can be a powerful tool for those seeking to understand

themselves. Decreasing the isolation and hopelessness felt in existential depression and increasing social connections by helping gifted individuals find peers are two other areas I believe that we can and must support.

Cross • *What topics are you most concerned about currently?*

Amend • COVID-19 and its on-going impact on gifted students, both educationally and socially-emotionally. 2020 was awful for many and I don't think we'll know the full extent of its effects on gifted students for quite some time. As we are now into 2022, we're beginning to see more effects. The loss, grief, tragedy, daily disruptions, missed educational opportunities, lost peer connections, and family strain hit many of us, and the trauma created still lingers. While the impact was different for each of us, we all felt the pain of 2020 and 2021 in some way.

Outside of the practice of counseling, and into the larger world of giftedness, my biggest concern is the fractured nature of our field. My mentor Jim Webb used to say that if you put three psychologists in a room, you automatically have at least six different opinions. The gifted field is filled with many opinions, as well as many facts, but is somewhat fractured as many bright and intense individuals have different opinions on what's most important. While all have good intentions, many see different priorities or different paths. We don't always agree on what giftedness looks like or what gifted individuals really need. Of course, there are some universal truths, but even those are hard to get the general populace to hear and agree on. There are many more that are debatable. Continuing to explore these is healthy for the field to grow, as long as it is done respectfully. More research, more practice, and more collaboration between groups will help. After all, educators, researchers, and practicing clinicians who work with gifted individuals all have the same goal—to see them thrive.

Cross • *What should everybody know about the social and emotional needs of gifted individuals?*

Amend • I think it is important to understand that there are social and emotional characteristics of gifted people. Those characteristics in and of themselves do not always create needs and, in fact, some of the characteristics can be assets. Needs typically arise when a gifted individual, or a system (e.g., family or school or workplace) working with that individual, is unable or unwilling to understand or address the impact of these characteristics.

Of course, the asynchronous or uneven development of gifted individuals, with intellectual and/or academic development often outpacing emotional or physical development, is the most obvious characteristic that does indeed create a need. Educational needs arise when these

students outpace their classmates; social and emotional needs arise when the level of understanding or maturity differs between them and their age peers. Meeting educational needs by accelerating, for example, tends to have positive or neutral effects on social and emotional adjustment, contrary to the popular myth that such interventions have negative effects. Other characteristics, such as intensity and perfectionist tendencies, are also seen among the gifted, and adjustment is more likely positive when one creates or is provided with outlets that accommodate these characteristics.

Cross • *What are common misperceptions about the social and emotional needs of gifted students?*

Amend • One common misperception is that they will be fine on their own. They don't need any special services or opportunities—they'll get it and we don't need to worry about them. Just as an athlete needs coaching to develop and hone their skills, a gifted student needs experts in education to help them grow. Consider where Michael Phelps, Carl Lewis, Serena Williams, or Alex Morgan would be if someone had decided they would be fine on their own. A professional who understands the needs of gifted individuals will provide the support needed to grow and develop potential.

Another misperception is that they all have social skills deficits or simply don't or won't fit in the world. Are there gifted individuals who struggle socially? Of course, there are. Are there any data to show it is a pervasive problem among the gifted? There is not. Sometimes, giftedness is used as an explanation (or excuse) for social skills problems ("Well, he is gifted, you know.") whether or not it actually contributes to the problem. It is important is to identify a social skill problem if it exists, determine its root (e.g., anxiety, lack of skills, lack of connection to peers, dissimilar interests, or even disability) and address the core challenge without assuming it is only related to gifted.

Cross • *As you reflect on your career working with gifted students, what are the most important professional lessons that you have learned?*

Amend • Gifted children and adolescents are, first, kids. They have basic needs like all kids—they need love and support from caring adults. They should be valued for themselves and not for what they do. For them, understanding giftedness and its implications is important, and I work to help them understand giftedness in a way that recognizes it as part of themselves, but not something that defines them. Giftedness cuts through every aspect of one's life and can be a powerful source for good—or not so good—depending on how it's channeled. I think

it's important to help a gifted student put giftedness in its proper place in their life.

Second, there is a false dichotomy at work both in the public view and in some places of the field. The belief that one must work to meet educational needs OR social and emotional needs—not both—comes to the fore in conversation with some parents and professionals. This is simply not true and gifted individuals must be treated and nurtured as a whole person, by helping them address all aspects of themselves, including intellectual, educational, social, and emotional domains.

Cross • *If you were to advise aspiring clinical psychologists about working with gifted individuals, what would you share with them?*

Amend • First, become a good psychologist. Get good training in working with children and adults of all types and in all settings, if possible. I was lucky enough to work in both inpatient and outpatient settings with both children and adults. Working in schools with many types of special needs students has really helped my understanding of 2e students' needs.

Being able to recognize mental illness in children and adults is important and being able to distinguish mental illness from typical behaviors and gifted behaviors can be challenging due to masking, or because some may work to hide it. As a psychologist working with gifted families, you will encounter "problems of living" and severe mental illness, as well as everything in between. Being able to see those differences will allow you to provide the appropriate level of support.

In addition, of course, it's important to cultivate an understanding of giftedness in all its forms. Read as much as you can, spend time observing and interacting with gifted children and adults, go to conferences like NAGC and SENG, and talk with experts in the field. Most of us love what we do and are happy to share, because there aren't enough of us. Incorporating this understanding into your daily work will be necessary to working well with this population.

Psycho-education is an important part of working with gifted individuals. Sometimes they need information and support as much as treatment for mental health concerns. While there are no "empirically supported" treatment protocols for gifted people, there are empirically supported treatments for depression and anxiety, for example. Knowing those, combined with an understanding of giftedness, will allow you to provide quality services to this population. But, warmth and genuineness are also important because it is true that, as the cliché states, many people don't care how much you know until they know how much you care.

Cross • *Given that most doctoral programs in psychology do not offer formal training in gifted education, giftedness, gifted psychology and so forth, how should we prepare psychologists to work with students with gifts and talents?*

Amend • I believe we must help both undergraduate and graduate level psychology and social work students understand that gifted children and adults actually may have problems, so they don't fall into believing the myth I mentioned earlier that they will do fine on their own. Part of this is on those who run graduate programs, but part of this also falls on those practicing. Find ways to bring graduate students into your practices, by allowing them to at least shadow and observe your work or provide supervision for clinical work with gifted students. If you have knowledge to share, volunteer to present to graduate students at local universities about what gifted students need. While not all will be open to the information, reaching one can make a significant difference in the lives of many.

For those already in university settings, many of you are likely housed in education departments. Consider crossing into different departments, including graduate clinical or counseling programs, or even undergraduate psychology departments, to teach courses or at least guest lecture in classes to begin to raise awareness about gifted issues. I've always said that we "in gifted land" are really good at "preaching to the choir" and need to do a better job of teaching others outside the field to make the most difference. Find ways to do that. There are many creative people in this field and, surely, they can find other ways to get accurate information out as well. We all have a responsibility to get good information out because a little knowledge can ripple quickly.

Cross • *What have I not asked you that you would like to share with us?*

Amend • Giftedness and its associated characteristics can help explain why gifted individuals feel different, act differently, or view things from unusual perspectives. Recognizing the giftedness allows us to provide appropriate interventions to address the characteristics and needs of gifted children and adults. However, giftedness should not be used as an excuse for inappropriate behavior resulting from it. For example, if a gifted child is very high energy but does not have ADHD, we can explain the behavior as possibly related to giftedness, intensity, or psychomotor overexcitability, but we should also take steps to address it, rather than downplaying the impact as a part of giftedness. One's adjustment is built upon accurate understanding of oneself and an ability to address the challenges that arise along the way.

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Related Readings

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Edward R. Amend, Psy.D. is a clinical psychologist at The Amend Group, a comprehensive center for psychological, educational, and gifted services in Lexington, Kentucky. Dr. Amend is licensed to practice in both Kentucky and Ohio, where he focuses on social, emotional, and educational needs of gifted, twice-exceptional, and neurodiverse youth, adults, and their families. He has worked in private practice and community mental health settings, and consulted with clinics, hospitals, schools, and other organizations.

Dr. Amend is co-author of two award-winning books: *A Parent's Guide to Gifted Children*, and *Misdiagnosis and Dual Diagnoses of Gifted Children and Adults: ADHD, Bipolar, OCD, Asperger's, Depression, and Other Disorders* (Second Edition). Dr. Amend has authored or co-authored a number of articles, book chapters, and columns about gifted children. He presents nationally and internationally about gifted children, and his service has included various roles with NAGC, SENG, and *The G WORD* film's Advisory Board.