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Interview

Rena Subotnik: An Interview with an Icon in the Field

Rena F. Subotnik, Ph.D.
Interviewed by Tracy L. Cross, Ph.D.

Dr. Tracy Cross spoke with Dr. Rena Subotnik, to discuss her career and her impact on the field of gifted education. Dr. Subotnik has just announced her retirement from her longstanding role at the American Psychological Association (APA), which is the latest in a long list of differing and highly impactful roles she has held over the decades. One of her latest contributions has been the Talent Development Megamodel, co-created with her colleagues Paula Olszewski-Kubilius and Frank Worrell, which is instrumental for understanding the psychology of high performance.

Dr. Rena Subotnik

Cross • *Over the years, you and I have talked a bit about how much of the research and other publications related to the psychology of gifted students has tended to emphasize potential maladies, issues, detriments or hardships of gifted children as sort of a primary rationale for the importance of the field. Some very good work has been done in this area and continues to be done. But what also needs to be produced, especially given people like yourself and others who come from an educational psychology background, research about what we need to know about them so they can become fully realized as human beings, academically, interpersonally, you name it. Be productive, be high achievers, high performers. And that is wide open, in my opinion. Now, I think the Megamodel can inspire young researchers and educators, and I think that is a tremendous help, a major step forward for the field. Please tell me about your thinking about that basic juxtaposition that we focus a great deal in one aspect of the psychology of gifted student, but not very much on the more performance-oriented side of the equation at this time in history. What do you think we should do about it?*

Subotnik • Professionals work with what they know and how they were trained. If you're trained as a clinician who deals with people coming to your practice with problems, then it's likely that's the population you are going to study and be concerned about, and colors how you view gifted children. Like you said, as educational psychologists we look at groups of students and how they learn compared to others, and how kids function within groups and in response to instruction, curriculum, and school and home climate. From that standpoint you see the whole range of gifted kids—from those whom you wish would be treated by a clinician or are currently engaged with a clinician, to those who are not only stellar academically but have everything going for them—they're good-looking (!), fine athletes, the whole nine yards, and have great personalities. So, I would argue that there are two perspectives on gifted and talented education derived from two populations of professionals: (1) psychologists working in schools, out of school institutions, and in collaboration with higher education, and (2) psychologists who see children primarily in practice. People who are in practice give us incredibly important insights. But those insights cannot be generalized to the gifted population as a whole.

So, there's the issue of whom shall we study in the gifted field. How do you determine giftedness and how does it get manifested? My research has become increasingly focused on domain-specific giftedness. Certainly, I was influenced heavily by studying with Abraham Tannenbaum, and the chance opportunities I had to study adolescents talented in science and in also in classical music. If you recall, Tannenbaum's definition:

> Keeping in mind that developed talent exists only in adults, a proposed definition of giftedness in children is that it denotes their potential for becoming critically acclaimed performers or exemplary producers of ideas in spheres of activity that enhance the moral, physical, emotional, social, intellectual, or aesthetic life of humanity. (Tannenbaum, 1986, p. 33)

Cross • *I remember back when I was at the Indiana Academy, you and I had a conversation and you told me that you had come to understand that the Juilliard graduates given explicit instruction about pursuing opportunities. They needed to develop knowledge and skills in that area in order to have a healthy career, a robust career. That really stuck with me because I see that in a lot of people. My own children, perhaps in some ways, too. But do you think that is similar for all domains? Or do you think it varies a lot by domain, that there's that specific knowledge that would be within a domain or part of the culture of a domain? Insider knowledge is what I'm asking about.*

Subotnik • We have a paper under consideration on insider knowledge in science that scratches the surface in this new area. The people we interviewed are established

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scientists of different generations. Insider knowledge and the whole culture of a career in science have changed so much. The older people in our sample are professors. But the younger ones all wanted to be entrepreneurs, because the life of academia was just not appealing to them. So, there's a whole lot of insider knowledge that gets lost for people who go to these grad programs and their professors are teaching them how to be a professor, and they don't want to be a professor.

Also, many of our study subjects had parents who really pressured them to become a doctor and they ended up wasting years pursuing medicine when they wanted to be a physicist. A couple of them worked with professors who were brilliant but treated their grad students horribly. One young entrepreneur said, "I thought this was what rigor was, so I endured it because I thought have to be tough." There are all kinds of really important insights about career trajectories that need to be shared with young people with interests and passions in science.

Cross • *I have felt like the some of the questions around how to identify giftedness, if that's the way of thinking of it, and the role that things like IQ can play need to be situated one way or another, to draw reasonable conclusions about. And certainly, domain specificity may be the best single approach, but something even broader. Like, are we talking about functioning well in school situations versus outside of school situations? I'm interested in your notions about the role of, say, IQ in decisions we might make about access that young people can have all the way through college.*

Subotnik • During the early days of my career. I was asked to conduct a follow up study of Hunter College Elementary School students from the 1940s and 1950s. During that time period, it was harder to get into Hunter Elementary than it was to get into Harvard. To get in, each child needed to score at the 97th percentile or above on an individualized IQ test. The school was designed to provide a special education for a high IQ school population. Forty years after graduation, when the results of my study were published, I found them to wonderful citizens, but not exceptional performers.

In response to the study, many in our field said that it doesn't matter if they did not turn out to be outstanding creative producers. They still had a high IQ and needed a special education at the time. And I accept that argument. However, if you have all that brain power and you were privileged enough to have this great education, and still turned out like other upper middle-class kids who went to private school in their neighborhood, you have to wonder about the point of that kind of gifted education, and if we are identifying children appropriately. In later graduating classes, there was an eventual Nobel laureate, and a renowned Broadway composer, but by then changes were put in place regarding the use of IQ and top 3% cut off.

The question as I see it is, what would you use instead of IQ? I guess you could expose children to enriched environment and see how they respond. That's the ideal approach. And with early identification areas like math, there are some instruments that are predictive of future performance. But in so many areas we don't know anything. So, is it better to employ something that's standardized and rigorous? Or nothing? I don't know. I respect people who use IQ and I want high-IQ children to be served. That exploration of giftedness is just not an interesting direction for me, especially under conditions of scarce resources.

Cross • *This is one of the things that Larry talked a lot about that I really appreciated. He really worried that people want to attribute more power or influence to predictive measures rather than actual measures of achievement, accomplishment or performance. His view was: if a person performs at an extraordinary level, you don't really need to know whether you think it's possible for them. If you're seeing the behavior, you don't need to predict it. I agree! Would you mind talking about writing teams for maximal creativity?*

Subotnik • Well, my productivity skyrocketed once I started working with partners. First there was Karen Arnold, and we published *Remarkable Women* and *Beyond Terman: Contemporary Longitudinal Studies of Giftedness and Talent* and then after that it was Linda Jarvin, with whom I published the work on music conservatories. And then, 2009 I joined with Paula Olszewski-Kubilius and Frank Worrell as a writing team in response to an invitation by the Association for Psychological Science to write an article for their journal Psychological Science in the Public Interest. Writing by myself was never rewarding to me. I think part of it was my tendency to procrastinate, whether due to performance fears, or whatever. If you're going to write in a partnership, do it with a peer. It's different than writing with a grad student, which you often have to do if you're an academe. There has to be agreement that you swap who's the first author. Not automatically, because sometimes somebody really brought in a project and it's not fair to not give credit to that person, but whenever possible.

Also, if you write collaboratively, over time you find out how to be the most efficient. Frank lives in California, Paula lives in Chicago—so we have very few opportunities to work together in person. Usually, one of us will start a section and pass it along, until everyone says, okay, this is good enough. If you're going to be the first author, you're responsible for keeping it moving; you at least have to generate the outline and set up the meetings, make sure people are staying focused (because we are all pulled in lots of directions). By now the process is more like a well-oiled machine.

Cross • *I've like I kiddingly said, I sort of watched with envy as your group continued to work. I've seen people come together and*

produce a book or products, but not for several years, as you all have. It's really encouraging, it's something I want to talk to my doctoral students about.

Subotnik • You have to be on the same page in terms of philosophy and beliefs. I knew that any philosophical arguments Paula, Frank, and I have are within a certain range. We agree on what's important, what's a fair amount of work to do, which pieces of literature are the most interesting, things like that.

Cross • *Do you have a favorite work from this group?*

Subotnik • Hmm. Well, there are a lot. I really love the *Psychology of High Performance* book. We edited and didn't write all of it, but I thought it was very cool to have the chance to work with people with expertise in sport, art, academe, and professions. We did a paper on mentoring, And some other psychologists joined with us on a paper on gatekeepers that I thought was great. I mean, I've liked all of them.

All of them focus on some aspect of the Megamodel but always with a new twist or focus.

Cross • *Is there a sensibility that you can describe that you think the three of you all have?*

Subotnik • I think we all are fascinated by creative people. Frank is a musician at heart and works actively as a choral director. Paula's daughter is an artist. I had the opportunity to do this study at Juilliard and other renowned conservatories with Linda Jarvin. And we've worked with great scientists, sports psychologists, and military psychologists. All these people are exploring, "What's excellence and how do you get there?"

Cross • *That makes sense to me. I have always found art to be primal. One of my sons is an artist and he explains to me things that I could not understand or articulate on my own. As a person who likes art a great deal, I would not have known or appreciated as much as do without my so's expertise. And so, over the years, there is a small accumulation of that kind of knowledge.*

There's a richness and a primacy to these things that challenge assumptions.

I want the world to hear you talk about the Megamodel and anything from it that you think is important. And if you do not mind, I would like to capture you talking about eminence. I just think that is a wonderful challenge. It's like laying it out there for people that maybe the idea of truly caring about high performance means that there are some goals that have to be set pretty high. And, you know, that is just one way of thinking about it. But I would like for our field to eventually get to the point where we have a big impact on both the psychological well-being and high performance, whether it is in school, or sports, or art, or dance, or politics and on and on.

Subotnik • Upon reflection, eminence was not necessarily the best word to use. We're really talking about transformational creativity. Our goal is to describe an aspiration for gifted and talented education to promote the shaping a field or a domain such that it transforms other people's behaviors or the way that they look at a problem. And that could happen in the arts, it could happen in sports, it could happen in scholarship, and in professions. We aren't talking about fame, but rather about coming up with an idea or product that other people feel helps them to understand the world better, or to find the world nicer, or more beautiful, or healthier. It's important to have a goal for our field because the alternative has been counting how many people get into Harvard or get into medical school. I mean, what's the point of that in the end?

Certainly, most people do not want to sacrifice a "normal life" to be a transformationally creative person. And no one should feel obliged to pursue that goal. But anybody who wants should have access to whatever skills, opportunities, et cetera, to try to reach their goals. Even then, admittedly, it may be near impossible to get where you want, so you might need advice, mentoring, insider knowledge, to redirect your talents and energies. For example, there are just so many jobs as artistic director of a philharmonic orchestra, even if you are fantastic. And the redirecting can lead to some transformational creativity.

A lot of arts institutions are trying to find other ways for people to be transformational in addition to being an art teacher—which is also very important, such as working in an arts related business or trying a different genre. And of course, there are fields that don't yet exist. Some creative people will connect fields together, start new fields, et cetera. The point is to move the endpoint of gifted education beyond school into adulthood and careers. And if people argue about that idea, that's good. But to say it's not important to encourage and promote transformational creativity, I don't get that.

In terms of evolving new directions for the Megamodel, we've become increasingly interested in outside of person factors. In recent years, we've been talking about, "What are the roles of gatekeepers? What is the role of insider knowledge?" Because those two factors really have an impact on who gets opportunities to move forward in a domain. And if everybody had access to the insider knowledge that you need, there might be fewer ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic disparities than we are seeing in gifted programs. As an example, in one district in Virginia near DC, some schools were not given information about how to apply to district wide selective programs. That's obscene.

So, insider knowledge being made explicit is very important. And then gatekeepers, what is their role? How do they get there? What wisdom do they have? How do you make sure people you mentor get to meet gatekeepers and present their work? And we're not approaching these questions it in a cynical way. Rather

than say, "It's all rigged and screwed up," we're saying, "This is what it is, and let's try to make it fairer."

Cross • *When I was a little boy, my dad was invited by several art galleries in Atlanta and different cities to hang their shows for them. So, he would sometimes take me and I went on a few of those trips and he'd hang the pictures in different ways. And so, as a 10-year-old, I knew a bit about hanging art shows and some other things that my dad thought were important. It was an interesting thing to learn about because, you know, as an outsider you would not assume that name tags of pictures would be important, but evidently it can be quite important. And other things too: spacing, lighting, wall cover fabrics, the whole panoply of things. Some of it is technical, but some of it is these other things, aesthetic sensibilities for example. I think that art is such an exciting field. And insider knowledge is the next ingredient that we have not really done a lot with yet, that could open up doors and improve performance.*

Subotnik • One of the things I feel has grown out of my work and the Megamodel is a more—well, I hate to use this word, "nuanced,"—view of mentoring. The word "mentoring" tends to be used as "a match made between a student who's ready to do research and somebody who agrees to take them on." What we've been doing is thinking about three levels of mentorship that focus on the talent development model. The first level involves providing exposure—like a talk, or demonstration, or video. I would classify that as "mentoring at a distance." It doesn't have to be somebody you ever actually meet who turns you on to an area of study.

The next stage is the more traditional "fix up," which works best for getting competencies to expertise. But then there's a higher level, which is what happens in most doctoral programs or in sports or the arts, where a mentor picks you. Somebody picks you because they want you to be their mentee. How do you prepare for that? How do you make yourself noticeable so somebody will want you as their mentee because that mentor could share their wisdom and open doors? Preparing yourself tastefully, is a way to be active and not passive in acquiring a mentor. This psychosocial skill is taught explicitly in professional music programs.

Cross • *I cannot help but reflect on some of the doctoral students I have had the privilege to work with over the years, and learning about mentorship and its importance, and perhaps how to go about it a little bit more now than before. One of our doctoral students really stands out to me in his sort of clear-headedness about the kind of relationship he wanted with me. I always feel quite honored when he reaches out to me and asks questions. That quality that he has, to have the confidence to approach someone like me and say, "I really think this and that."*

This is a very important topic. And, you know that I often talk about the importance you have had in the field as someone who introduced so many of us to each other. I could name probably up to a fifteen people I have met through your direct efforts whom I maintained a professional friendship, probably close to 30 years now. Perhaps not to the level of mentorships per se, but certainly relationships with advice, encouragement, support, and collaboration. I think that what you are talking about is very important, and you have played such a big role in it our field bringing it about.

Subotnik • A couple of other things that I thought of as you described your student. My Associate Director is now in a doctoral program. She made the mistake of telling her advisor that she didn't want to go into academe—and as a result, she said their relationship changed. I failed to give her that insider knowledge! Never tell a professor you don't want to be like him or her if you want to be their favorite. A mentor's job is teaching psychosocial skills, or modeling psychosocial skills, and also giving insider knowledge.

The other thing that is very important for a mentor to do is help mentees find their own ideas for transformational creativity. Mentoring is developmental, and the role of the mentor changes in terms of the relationship and their responsibilities over the course of talent trajectories. At both the second level (from competency to expertise) and the third level (from expertise to transformative creativity), insider knowledge increases in importance in the mentoring role.

I'm not an at a university, rather I'm working at a professional association/scientific society. I was talking with my supervisor about the position of Associate Director because we wished we could pay the Associate more. And I said, the only advantage besides pay is that every one of them has gone to graduate school in psychology or related field. And the next person should be somebody who aspires to a graduate program because the Associate's job in and of itself is a dead-end job.

Cross • *That's really a nice role that you play. And it is nice that you do and can reach out to your connections who are psychologists interested in taking on your Associates in their graduate programs.*

Subotnik • The other thing I wanted to talk about, and maybe this is most relevant for this journal, is the distinction between psychosocial skills focused on well-being and psychosocial skills designed to promote high performance. Once I started getting introduced to the performance world of classical music and sports, I started hearing about different strategies that were focused on helping someone be competitive. And I thought, wow, I wish I'd learned these things earlier in life. I wish that all kids who have to deal with competition—which could be all kids, but especially academically talented kids who are doing Science Fairs or Olympiads or any of those things as part of their repertoire—could use these skills. For some people, like a musician, stage fright is a serious issue because everything that they do from how they walk out on stage, to how they introduce their music,

to how they interact with the audience, is what they get paid for. It's their job. And then of course, imagine singing the national anthem at the Super Bowl, or Lady Gaga singing that at the inauguration of Joe Biden. Can you imagine the pressure?

Another example of a psychosocial skill addressing high performance is screening out distractions, something that kids in school could use, like during a test when people click their pens or having "pings" go off in the room. Screening out distractions is a mental exercise.

The last psychosocial skill related to high performance that I'll mention for now is dealing with other's response to creativity or success. Kevin Wildenhaus, a sports psychologist, wrote a chapter in *Remarkable Women* where he talked about working with one girl who was a figure skater. She reported that "All of a sudden, my skating friends aren't talking to me." And he said, "Well, what's different from the last time we talked?" and she said, "I won a national championship." When you break out of a group, you'd expect people would be happy for you, but they're not always happy for you.

Her peer group probably knew that she's likely going to be practicing with different people. She probably will have a different coach. She'll be traveling without her old friends. Bob Sternberg has said that part of being talented is, you get enemies. If you're creative, if you shatter the status quo in any way, you're going to suffer blowback. I think it's important to prepare kids that while everyone tells you to be creative, they don't really mean it if you're too creative. In other words, if whatever you discover or promote makes other people do things in different ways, it won't necessarily be well-received, and they should know that in advance. Because then you can say, "Okay, I expected this. I heard that this was going to happen."

Cross • *I presented a couple of papers about 35 years ago from interviews I'd done with middle school gifted girls. And they taught me words like "not too". So they would say things like, oh yeah, being smart is really important, but not too smart. Performing well in class was really important, but not too high. In other words, there was a line that high performance was good, but not too high performance. Because, then they told me all the things that could come from that; losing friends was one of them that they talked about. 40 years ago. That's very interesting. And another paper I presented was called "To Be or Not to Be." And it was, again, just taking what their words were, and trying to craft them into how they described their lives. Trying to find the place where they could pursue what they wanted to, not give it up. But there were lines in the sand, and you had to learn, are you willing to cross them? These were 13-year-old girls for the most part, telling me these things.*

Subotnik • Well, it's also choosing your battle, so it may be worth not appearing too smart in certain circumstances, but that's where a mentor would help to say, "Is this a good place to stick out, or should you hang in there to get a good recommendation so you can stick out at a more important place?"

Cross • *You know, it is such a salient issue because I think it cuts across all fields. Maybe that is too big a statement, but having that relationship with someone where you could advise them and they could hear you, that would help so many people. Don't give up on your dreams unless you're willing to.*

Subotnik • How you frame the issue is really important. For example, with the figure skater distressed about her friends, I would explain that it's a natural instinct for her friends to be concerned that she will move away and abandon them, and hopefully these friends will come around after a while and root for her. She was also like taking somebody else's dream. If she won then it's not likely that one of the other ones will win too, unless they're much younger, and she needs to feel compassion for their response.

Cross • *This is really good. Your articulation of the need to train people, teach people, prepare people what to expect, can really save some heartache. And, as you said, how you frame it matters a lot, because like you said, if you lose your friends because you performed well, maybe you need to rethink your friends. Now I can imagine my 13 year old daughter just wincing at me saying something like that. But, you know, talking about an athlete performing at such a high level, gosh. And you said this was an ice skater—the toil and the practice, the degree of difficulty and all the things they deal with.*

Subotnik • I hope maybe this would be an interesting follow up in the journal: Which professionals should coordinate and deliver psychosocial skills development for high performance to young people? It should primarily be mentors, but what about for elementary school age kids or even middle and high school teachers who are not necessarily mentors unless they have a one-on-one relationship with a talented student in their subject area? Should there be a component of every subject that deals with high performance issues just the way social and emotional learning is being integrated into schools? And should it be just for talented kids?

Finally, with your editorship, Tracy, the journal can be a home for psychologists and educators to speak across perspectives to ensure that gifted education is supportive of the difficult choices we need to make about whom we serve and why. I have found more sympathy and engagement with general education audiences when talking about talent in domains. However, in a more perfect world every child who is potentially gifted or talented would receive a special education. Until we achieve that goal, we need to prioritize for greatest need and concurrently advocate for broader funding and recognition.

Rena F. Subotnik Ph.D. is Director of the Center for Psychology in Schools and Education at the American Psychological Association. One of the Center's missions is to generate public awareness, advocacy, clinical applications, and cutting-edge research ideas that enhance the achievement and performance of children and adolescents with gifts and talents in all domains. She is co-author (with Paula Olszewski-Kubilius and Frank Worrell) of "Nurturing the Young Genius: Renewing our Commitment to Gifted Education is Key to a More Innovative, Productive and Culturally Rich Society" (*Scientific American*), "A Developmental View of Mentoring Talented Students in Academic and Non-academic Domains" (in *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*), "Rethinking Giftedness and Gifted Education: A Proposed Direction Forward Based on Psychological Science" (in *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*), "Gifted Students" (*Annual Review of Psychology*), and co-editor with Paula Olszewski-Kubilius and Frank Worrell) of *The Psychology of High Performance: Developing Human Potential Into Domain-Specific Talent.*
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