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Counsellor's corner: An interview with Sal Mendaglio

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Interview

Counsellor's Corner: An Interview with Sal Mendaglio

Sal Mendaglio, Ph.D.

Interviewed by Tracy L. Cross, Ph.D. 

In this ongoing series known as the Counselor's Corner, Dr. Tracy Cross interviews well respected professional psychologists and counselors to gain their insights into the lives of gifted and/or high ability people they have counseled. Dr. Sal Mendaglio recently retired from a long and active career at the University of Calgary. Over the years he contributed numerous articles and books about gifted students and is recognized as a leading expert on the works of Kazimierz Dąbrowski.



Dr. Sal Mendaglio

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?*

Mendaglio • I was born in Capistrano, the one in Calabria, Italy, not California. My family moved to Montreal, where I grew up. During my early

years, it was challenging navigating the two conflicting cultures of small-town Southern Italy and the big city Anglo-Franco culture of Montreal. My elementary school had a significant proportion of Italian immigrant students. Having to master English created an acute awareness of words but left residual effects of being a second language learner.

I can describe most of my life with one word: improbable—from humble beginnings as an Italian immigrant boy to professor and psychologist. I was the first of my family to attend university. I received all my education in Canada: a BA in psychology from St. Francis Xavier, a liberal arts university in Nova Scotia, a B.Ed. from the Université de Montréal, a master's in counseling from McGill University, and a Ph.D. in counseling psychology from the University of Toronto. Following several years teaching elementary and junior high school in Montreal, I obtained an appointment at the University of Calgary, from which I have recently retired.

I am fond of saying that I am a good example of the chance theory of vocational development. Key elements of my education and occupation were all the result of serendipity—no planning on my part. One thing led to another. I suppose that in retrospect, I could claim, as Carl Rogers might say, that I was open to experience but

the truth is that I had little knowledge of how systems worked.

My getting involved with counseling gifted individuals is a prime example of the role of serendipity—or as Gagne might say more dispassionately, chance factors affecting my life. I had just begun my academic appointment at the University of Calgary and had also qualified for a licence in psychology in our province. One of the courses that I was assigned to teach was a master's level counseling practicum, which involved field supervision of students. I wanted to avoid simply teaching "by the book" and so I established a small independent practice. I soon began receiving referrals of clients of various ages and presenting problems. While I was establishing my general counseling practice, a local educator was piloting an elementary school level program for gifted students in the public school district. One day, I was approached by the administrator of the fledgling education program, asking whether I would accept a referral of a gifted student who was underachieving in her program. I informed her that I knew nothing about gifted students. Her reply, that neither did any other local psychologist, convinced me to accept the referral. That first referral led to my comprehensive self-study program: perusing literature, and attending relevant conferences. And, as they say, the rest is history!

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

Mendaglio • In the early 2000s, I published two items: an article and a book chapter, about counseling gifted individuals. The message of the article (Mendaglio, 2005) became the foundation of my approach to effective counseling with these clients: we must take giftedness into account. Like all people who become clients, gifted individuals need counselors who demonstrate the ingredients of effective counseling: ability to establish and maintain a helping relationship, a theory of counseling, self-efficacy as a counselor, and relevant content knowledge. Without relationship-building skills and an explicit theory of counseling, effective counseling cannot happen. What is needed to successfully counsel gifted individuals is knowledge of giftedness. What this

means is that counselors must have a conception of giftedness that they infuse into the process—we must take giftedness into account. There is a lack of consensus on what constitutes giftedness; therefore, counselors must construct their own conception. Without this ingredient, clients may still benefit from what we consider effective counseling, but the likelihood of successful outcome is increased when we infuse giftedness into the process. My conception of giftedness includes both a definition and three characteristics of giftedness. In short, I view giftedness exclusively as a high level of intelligence. The only other author that defined giftedness in this way was Barbara Clark in her classic *Growing up Gifted* book (Clark, 1997). Further, I view high intelligence, and therefore giftedness, as potential for extraordinary achievement. In other definitions, prodigious productivity is part of the definition of giftedness. Regarding characteristics, I conclude that all gifted persons have three characteristics: heightened sensitivity, analytic attitude, and self-criticism described elsewhere (Mendaglio, 2007)

In my book chapter (Mendaglio, 2007) I labelled my counseling approach as *affective cognitive therapy*. I placed "affective" first to emphasize the preeminent role that emotions play in clients generally and especially among clients who are gifted. My assumption is, regardless of presenting problems, that many clients approach us because they are overwhelmed by their negative emotions. Due to the heightened sensitivity characteristic, gifted individuals generate a great deal of intense emotion—of course, it is the intensity of negative emotion that leads them to seek counseling. In my approach, in addition to general effective counseling ingredients, I infuse my conception of giftedness didactically in the process. My aim is to help gifted clients understand and accept that intense experiences are inherent in giftedness. The goal, then, is to help them manage their emotionality. Teaching them that their intensity is due to giftedness is an important step in eliminating their belief that there is something wrong with them because of the intensity of their feelings. It is important to note that what I am describing is different from stating: intensity is part of giftedness, do not worry. It is my presenting in detail my conception of giftedness that has the power—not simply stating the obvious.

A final comment on my approach: while the field of gifted education appears to move toward viewing giftedness in terms of prodigious productivity and achieving eminence, I have been involved in understanding the experience of being gifted, by creating a psychology of giftedness.

I can also describe my counseling practice based on the nature of the clients who seek my help. By far, the most common requests come from parents—to be honest—from mothers, who are concerned about their gifted children, most often their sons. A subset of parents state that their children had previously seen

other psychologists, whom parents believed were not aware of giftedness. For gifted students, parents are the referral source. It is rare, in my experience, to encounter self-referred students requesting my help. A small proportion of my clients are adults, most of whom were not identified gifted, but they are highly intelligent and are having work or intimate relationship difficulties.

My specialty is offering parent counseling. It often surprises parents when they contact me to counsel their gifted children that I say that I want to work with them first. Parents tend to be initially skeptical since they want their children "fixed". However they change their minds when I present my rationale. I realized years ago that when children are referred for counseling, it is likely that they will get a message that there is something wrong with them. In my experience that is rarely the case. In addition, when it comes to helping young children, I find it more efficient to consult with and guide their parents, sharing my conception of giftedness. Though I enjoy meeting with gifted children, I no longer meet with them unless it becomes clinically necessary.

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

Mendaglio • Academic underachievement continues to be a prevalent presenting problem. For counselors who have little knowledge about giftedness, this presenting problem may seem contradictory. Such a perspective is evidence of a myth regarding the nature of giftedness. I view academic underachievement as Blackburn and Erickson (1986) proposed many years ago, that this presenting problem is in fact a predictable crisis experienced by gifted students. The key to making progress with such clients is understanding that giftedness is potential and not achievement. Effort is required for students to actualize their academic potential.

Transition from regular education to gifted education programs is another challenge with which counselors could assist gifted students. There is a predictable lowering of academic self-concept as students move from being a star in a regular education program to being simply another gifted student in the special program. Known as "the big fish little pond effect," it is technically big fish little pond to just another fish. The consequent lowering of self-esteem will affect the student in the new program both socially and academically.

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

Mendaglio • My primary current concern is the potential disastrous effect of gifted individuals' emotional intensity. Many of us accept that it is heightened sensitivity, associated with giftedness, that creates intense emotions. Some have summed it up by declaring that gifted persons feel more because they see more. What concerns me most is the negative self-evaluation that I have heard

repeatedly over the years from clients regarding their intense emotionality. They feel that there is something wrong with them because they themselves think, or have been told, that they are constantly overreacting. We all overreact from time to time, but giftedness means a propensity to intensity of feeling. It is important for people who interact with gifted individuals, including counselors, not only to understand that intensity is part of giftedness, but to be careful not to reinforce the idea that there is something wrong with the gifted person. Helping clients understand that intensity is part of giftedness is a starting point to helping them learn to manage it. My message to such clients is: There is nothing wrong with you, it is your nature. The goal of counseling is to help manage that part of giftedness.

Another concern relates to gifted students' transition from high school to university, which I detail in Mendaglio (2013). I have dealt with numerous clients over the years who have suffered depression due to the shock of their low performance in the first semester of their university program. Most of these clients were in highly demanding programs such as engineering. They had the ability to be successful in their chosen field, but they lacked the one ingredient, appropriate level of effort. Elsewhere, I have termed this "hitting the wall", a phenomenon unique to gifted students. Receiving lower than expected grades is the overt problem, but the greater issue is covert—hitting the wall threatens the core of self-perception, resulting in the imposter syndrome. That is what causes the depression. When counselors attempt the help such clients, their focus should be the low self-esteem. Providing suggestions for enhancing study methods should not be the counselor's initial concern.

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

Mendaglio • In my experience, many of the challenges gifted individuals face are the result of the feedback they receive from the social environment. The lack of understanding that gifted children, adolescents, and adults experience from those around them contributes to gifted individuals' problems. If parents, teachers, and counselors knew more about giftedness, then many of the difficulties experienced by gifted individuals, leading them to seek counseling, would be lessened. There is one main need: acceptance. By this I do not mean excusing, for example, misbehaviors. As with all children, gifted children should be held accountable for disruptive behaviors. What I mean is understanding, for example that children will ask questions because of their cognitive characteristics and will be emotionally intense because of their giftedness. Such understanding would help gifted children begin to learn how to manage expression of their characteristics.

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

Mendaglio • I suspect that a common answer to this question would address a myth regarding giftedness: gifted students have it all and therefore have no extraordinary needs. Of course, I believe that is a misperception of gifted individuals' experiences. However, I take a different position on your question. I have noticed that some authors confuse characteristics with needs. For example, the following terms are included under the rubric "social and emotional needs": highly curious, constant questioning, outstanding memory, perfectionism, and underachievement! The first three words are actually cognitive characteristics, not needs. The latter two are actually negative outcomes of giftedness. Characteristics should not be misconstrued as needs. In my view, needs flow from characteristics. Therefore, identification of social and emotional needs should be connected to characteristics of giftedness. From what I have seen in the literature, Barbara Clark in her classic text, *Growing up Gifted* in numerous editions (e.g., Clark, 1997) takes this approach. She discusses characteristics using several categories. Of relevance to my answer to this question is her affective characteristics. Here are some examples of her characteristic-needs pairing: unusual sensitivity to the expectations and feelings of others—the need to learn to clarify the feelings and expectations of others; heightened self-awareness, accompanied by feelings of being different—the need to learn to assert own needs and feelings nondefensively; to share self with others, for self-clarification. Whether or not I agree with Clark's list of affective characteristics and needs, I think that she presents the appropriate approach to this question.

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

Mendaglio • I can think of a few important lessons that have influenced my counselling gifted individuals. Though I use "gifted children" I have learned that it is best to think of "children who are gifted," otherwise we lose sight of the fact that they are primarily children. Placing "gifted" first may create problems for the person throughout life. Meeting with parents of young, gifted children led me this conclusion. Specifically, this lesson arose from numerous parents of preschool-aged children who contacted me seeking enrichment ideas of their gifted children. Often this scenario arose soon after they had their young child assessed and the results indicated giftedness. In a sense, their message to me was: "My child is gifted, what should we do now? We want to ensure that we do our best to actualize our child's potential." Before responding, I asked for more information regarding the child. In many of these situations, parents described varying levels of


misbehaving children. My advice, which was not always well-received, was that attending to the child's behavior issues was more pressing than enrichment. In more extreme situations, parents would simply reply that the child's behavior was due to giftedness and their need to be independent and creative. My position is that gifted children, like all children, must be taught a minimum level of compliance with legitimate authority, alongside of receiving attention to their needs as gifted.

Considering the "gifted" part of child who is gifted, the characteristic of heightened sensitivity, in the sense of greater awareness, is of paramount importance. Heightened awareness permeates everything: how one sees the world, other people, and oneself. It is responsible for perceiving nuances in the social and physical environment that others miss. Most importantly, it has the power to create intense emotions. Greater awareness is a universal characteristic of giftedness. Viewing heightened sensitivity in this manner requires that giftedness must include a high level of intelligence, since awareness is a cognitive process. It is important to understand that my view of heightened sensitivity does not encompass expression of it. I am simply referring to mental experiencing, whether it is expressed or not is another matter.

I have learned that giftedness is not equivalent to production or achievement. Giftedness represents the potential for extraordinary achievement, despite what popular definitions would have us believe. This was obvious to me from the beginning—it is not a great leap from working with academic underachievers to reach my conclusion.

Lastly, I have learned that there exists a great divide in the field of gifted education with authors proposing definitions of giftedness on one side and researchers and educators on the other side. Authors propose definitions that include many criteria such as excellence in socially-accepted areas, while researchers use enrollment in a gifted education programs or high scores on tests of cognitive ability to select their participants. Meanwhile, educators use a high IQ score as a major, if not the definitive, criterion for selection of students for gifted programs/congregated schools. Ironically, scholars proposing more elaborate definitions shun Lewis Terman's high-IQ-based approach; researchers and educators, unwittingly, celebrate him. With many years of counseling experience with underachieving gifted students, leading to my viewing giftedness as potential not performance, I have no trouble siding with the researchers and educators.

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

Mendaglio • It will not be surprising to hear that I believe that to work effectively with gifted individuals
SENG Journal Vol. 2, No. 2, 57–62 

requires a combination of sound counseling practices and knowledge of giftedness. Effective counseling is based among other things, upon a theory of counseling that guides one's practice and that is communicated to clients, skill at building helping relationships, content knowledge of presenting problems, and knowledge of relevant research on intervention techniques. Effective counseling is currently described as evidence-based. This phrase refers to the evidence-based policy of the American Psychological Association. One feature of the policy that tends to receive most attention is evidence-based interventions, which exhorts psychologists to use strategies that have received empirical support. Empirically based interventions cannot apply strictly to counseling gifted individuals. If we accept that clients who are gifted constitute a unique population, we are not likely to find a body of empirical evidence supporting interventions applicable to such clients. Fortunately in the APA policy evidence is not limited to empirical support: the policy accepts as evidence both psychologists' experience and expertise in counseling and psychotherapy and their knowledge of the characteristics of the clients with whom they work. To have the greatest impact, psychologists working with clients who are gifted must have knowledge about giftedness and its characteristics. When knowledge of giftedness is combined with ingredients of effective counseling, gifted individuals receive the most benefit. In my practice, a large proportion of clients have reported previous experience with other psychologists, whom the clients noted had limited or no knowledge of giftedness.

In addition to knowledge of giftedness, psychologists need a high degree of self-efficacy in their role. In my experience, gifted individuals of all ages are likely to question our interpretations and suggestions. I have emphasized the characteristic of heightened awareness. Gifted individuals' keen awareness can detect insecurity in the psychologist. It is imperative that psychologists are prepared to articulate and explain their counseling approach. Psychologists also need to examine their attitudes toward giftedness and gifted individuals, to ensure that their attitudes are positive, or at least neutral. One last comment based on experience: gifted youth tend to be reluctant clients, usually in counseling because of their parents. At times gifted students use language skillfully to manipulate us, telling us what they think we want to hear.

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?*

Mendaglio • To be blunt, we cannot look to counseling and clinical psychology preparation programs directly

for a solution to this situation. I have been in the academy most of my adult life. I have taught counseling psychology at the master's and doctoral levels. As part of my administrative duties, I have participated on program review committees and admissions committees. From direct experience, I can say that program requirements are quite heavy already and it would be difficult to persuade administrators to add more topics. Further, if we were to add courses in giftedness, then the cry would be: What about other exceptionalities? Though very desirable, it is logistically difficult to add giftedness to preparation programs.

Having said that, it may be possible to inject giftedness, along with other exceptionalities, in preparation programs for school psychologists. I suspect that this may be occurring given that intelligence testing is an integral part of psychological assessment. Giftedness may be easily infused in courses along with other exceptionalities.

A final thought relates to any counselor or psychologist working in schools. There are districts where gifted education is mandated, and teachers require a credential to work in those programs. Analogously, counselors and psychologists working in those programs could be required to obtain additional certification to work in gifted programs.

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

Mendaglio • I add one other question: *How does Dąbrowski's theory of positive disintegration factor into your counseling?*

Despite what some authors believe, not all clients who are gifted are suitable for the application of Dąbrowski's theory in counseling. For one thing, Dąbrowski differentiated between high intelligence (i.e., giftedness) and intellectual overexcitability. Based on the theory, not all highly intelligent individuals are on the path of moral development (Mendaglio, 2022). Therefore, I do not routinely inject the theory of positive disintegration into my counseling. My conception of the psychology of giftedness is what I rely upon when counseling gifted individuals in general. However, occasionally, I encounter clients who present information that is consistent with elements of Dąbrowski's theory, such as forms of overexcitabilities and dynamisms. With those clients, I gradually introduce aspects of the theory to them. If the ideas resonate, then I use the theory to help clients understand themselves from the theory's perspective. In such cases, clients benefit significantly and deal more effectively with their presenting problems. My applying the theory follows Dąbrowski's own suggestion that counselors use his theory if they thoroughly understand it and if the client manifests a moderate to high level of developmental potential. It may seem difficult to determine level of developmental potential since we do not have a Dąbrowskian measure for that purpose. However, there is a practical way of inferring whether clients are suitable for using the theory—introduction of the theory to clients itself is an assessment procedure. A client's initial response to the theory will signal whether or not discussion of the theory would be beneficial.

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