PERFECTIONISM, ATTACHMENT AND GIFTEDNESS

By Mimi Wellisch

Studies and anecdotal reports on gifted children have typically provided confusing and contradictory information. For instance, Winner (2000) recounts how some researchers have claimed that gifted children are socially popular and well balanced whereas others have found the opposite to be true. These contradictions can be interpreted as the inevitable outcome of the diversity and uniqueness of the gifted population, but have also been blamed on poor research methods (Winner, 2000).

Most Western scholars subscribe to the conception of innate giftedness (Freeman, 2005; Sternberg, 2004; Winner, 2000). Many also believe that it is associated with particular characteristics and needs (Silverman, 1997), while some argue instead that there is no evidence that giftedness is innate and that it is hard work and application that lie behind eminent achievement (Ericsson, Prietula & Cokely, 2007; Howe, Davidson, & Slodov, 1998). Just as the causative factors of the contradictions have remained unanswered, so has a plausible definition and model continued to elude and divide the gifted sector (Alsup, 2003; Mayer, 2005; Renzulli, 2005), with an estimated 100 definitions and countless gifted models to choose from (Freeman, 2005).

It is possible, however, that we have been searching for the truth about gifted children in entirely wrong places, and that there may be an alternative explanation of the various pathways to giftedness which would therefore also provide some measure of predictability, and clarify options that can address gifted children's more challenging problems.

In step with the aforementioned abundance of definitions and models, a great deal has also been written about gifted children's characteristics, although few have conducted research into this area (Porter, 2005). One such study found that nearly 9 out of every 10 parents had nominated the characteristic of perfectionism in their exceptionally and profoundly gifted children (Rogers, & Silverman, 1997). Gifted children are known to be dissatisfied with their work because it is less than perfect (White, 2003), and some refuse to attempt new challenges, lest they should make mistakes or fail (Probst, 2006; Stroh & Goldman, 2002).

In this paper I argue that there is indirect evidence to support the multidimensional nature of giftedness, shaped by attachment style, with attending differences in behaviours and characteristics. As an example of this I will first discuss perfectionism, then outline how it varies according to attachment style, and finally make some evidence-based suggestions on ways to address the challenges faced by some gifted children with this gifted characteristic.

Perfectionism

Some recent and fascinating findings have emerged about perfectionism that may in turn help explain giftedness more generally (Flett & Hewitt, 2002). Two distinct aspects of perfectionism have been identified: an adaptive and a maladaptive aspect.
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The signs of adaptive perfectionism are:

- the setting of high but achievable personal standards
- preference for order and organisation
- self-satisfaction
- desire to excel
- motivation to achieve positive rewards

Maladaptive perfectionism, on the other hand, is marked by:

- the setting of unrealistically high standards
- intense rumination over mistakes
- perceived expectation that others require perfection
- perceived large discrepancy between one’s performance and personal standards
- compulsive doubting of one’s actions
- motivation to avoid negative consequences (Einars & Cox, 2002).

Attachment styles have also been linked to perfectionism. It has been found that secure attachment is associated with adaptive – or healthy – perfectionism, and insecure attachment with maladaptive, or unhealthy, perfectionism (Rice & Mirzadeh, 2000; Wei, Malinckrodt, Russell & Abraham, 2004). So, what is attachment, and how may attachment styles shape the development of perfectionism in gifted children?

Attachment

The term “attachment” implies strong liking or love of a person. In the study of child development and psychology, however, it has a more scientifically operational meaning, referring in particular to the special reciprocal relationship between babies and mothers (Prior & Glaser, 2006). Famous psychologist John Bowlby (1958) was the first to observe this relationship, which he likened to a biological instinct, with babies and young children displaying a strong need to seek out their mothers when they feel threatened or uncomfortable. This behaviour in turn elicits a response from their mothers, who then attend to these needs in ways that will eventually call forth either secure or insecure attachment.

The internalisation of attachment style, which colours the way we see and relate to others (Kaitz & Maytal, 2005), is established by around 3 years of age, and once established, it is fairly stable. One longitudinal study found that 72% of adults continued the same secure-insecure dichotomy which was first noted in their infancy (Prior and Glaser, 2006). As attachment styles appear to be crucial in all areas of development, and therefore also in how giftedness is expressed (Wellisch, under consideration), a brief outline of the genesis of attachment styles and the forms of attachment will follow.

Research Findings on the Mother’s Role in Attachment Styles

Although it may seem politically incorrect to specify attachment of babies to the “mothers” rather than to “parents” or “caregivers”, it has been found that the principal attachment figure of babies and young children is best characterized by the child–mother relationship (Fonagy, Steele & Steele, 1991; Sutton, 2006; Perry, 2002). It is thought that attachment style is forged by the level of sensitivity in care-giving and responding (Prior and Glaser, 2006) and mediated through the mother’s ‘reflective functioning’, or the ability to interpret the baby’s feelings and intentions (Fonagy, Steele, Steele, Leight, Kennedy, Maton et al., 1995). One study of expectant mothers was therefore able to correctly predict 75% of their babies’ future attachment styles (Fonagy, Steele & Steele, 1991). Research findings indicate that secure attachment occurs in approximately two thirds of the population and that it has a statistically significant association with later good functioning (Prior & Glaser, 2006).

Secure Attachment Outcomes

Securely attached children learn to have trust, confidence, self-reliance, resilience, personal (or self) efficacy, better ability to relate intimately, interpersonal/social competence, and the ability to regulate their emotions (Prior, & Glaser, 2006).
Secure attachment is therefore a buffer to stress and the precursor for the formation of healthy emotional development and relationships. Additionally, findings have indicated that it is also the precursor for competency in language and other cognitive functions (Prior, & Glaeser, 2006). Although many of the above attributes have been associated with gifted children, other characteristics associated with gifted children are more likely to belong amongst the insecurely attached population.

Does Secure Attachment Allow for Mistakes?

Miscommunications and mismatches between mother's interpretation and baby's needs are common in the mother-baby relationship. The research indicates that these frequent errors are regularly and effectively repaired in a timely manner, and that the repair is instigated by either the mother or the baby, without affecting secure attachment (Kaitz & Maytal, 2005). So, if mistakes can be repaired, what exactly are the causes of insecure attachment?

Causes of Insecure Attachment

The baby's temperament is not generally the deciding factor in insecure attachment. Research has shown that babies can attach with different attachment styles to different adults (e.g., insecurely to the mother and securely to the father), although in the case perceived 'difficult' babies, this factor may well tip the scales for mothers who are already struggling with sensitive responsiveness (Prior & Glaeser, 2006). The overwhelming evidence suggests that maternal anxiety and depression, as well as unresolved insecure attachment style dating from childhood are the underlying causes of insecure attachment in babies. The behaviours that cause insecure attachment in anxious and depressed mothers are:

- exaggerated, ill timed and often inappropriate responses
- intrusiveness
- overriding behaviours
- over-protectiveness
- controlling behaviours
- flat effect
- withdrawal
- signs of sadness
- under-responsiveness

(Kaitz & Maytal, 2005)

Insecure Attachment

Insecure attachment is categorized into three forms: Ambivalent/Resistant, Avoidant, and Disorganised. Only two, Ambivalent/Resistant and Avoidant styles, are outlined below, as findings about perfectionism involves only the first two forms of insecure attachment:

Ambivalent/Resistant attachment

These children tend to be more anxious, less forceful, less confident, more withdrawn, more passive and more resistant in the face of new experience than both the securely attached and the avoidant attached children. Children with this attachment style are more likely to be diagnosed with internalising disorders such as anxiety and depression. Anxiety and depression are states that inhibit the functioning of the frontal cortex, the part of the brain associated with intelligence and working memory (Perry, & Szalavitz, 2006), and can therefore also hamper intellectual potential. Additionally, these children generally present as anxious and withdrawn rather than the bounding positive outlook and high energy generally associated with secure attachment.

Mothers of ambivalent-resistant babies are thought to be
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under-involved and unpredictable in their responses, which is consistent with the view that maladaptive perfectionism in this attachment style may result from inconsistent responses to emotional and physical childhood needs, and may also have been caused by regular withdrawal of affection to control a child's behaviour (Mallinckrodt & Wei, 2003).

Avoidant attachment

These children are often hostile, angry, aggressive, with other antisocial behaviours, have more negative feelings, are more likely to scapegoat and victimise other children even during the preschool years (Prior, & Glasner, 2006). They are also more likely to be demanding and commanding, to have poor peer relationships and suffer from depression than those who are securely attached, and more likely to be diagnosed with externalising disorders such as Oppositional Defiant Disorder (Wolton, 1998).

Perfectionism in this attachment style is thought to be informed by a negative view of others while striving to seem perfect in their the eyes, perhaps in order to mask childhood wounds incurred due to inadequate emotional responsive caretaking (Wei, Mallinckrodt, Russell & Abraham, 2004). Mothers of babies with avoidant attachment have been found to be rejecting and intrusive (Prior & Glasner, 2006), and although the striving for perfection may have been a good defence mechanism early in childhood, it becomes a liability later if overused, and may well lead to depression and feelings of hopelessness (Wei et al., 2004).

The Role of Perfectionism in Mastery

Ericsson et al., (2007) claim that eminence or mastery is the result of long term tenacity and commitment, with at least 10,000 hours of dedicated and "deliberate practice" - involving continual improvement through ever more refinement and perfection - rather than innate ability. Perfectionism would therefore play a major role in the honing of high ability. It can be gleaned from the characteristics associated with adaptive and maladaptive perfectionism that those who are securely attached would be more likely to be perseverant, whereas the insecurely attached who are wrecked by self doubt and ruminate over mistakes can be expected to abandon the striving and submit to depression and hopelessness, which, if the research is to be believed, continue to foster below the surface of maladaptive perfectionism.

Addressing Maladaptive Perfectionism

Research indicates that children with maladaptive patterns who have been led to believe that their intelligence is innate by being told that they are clever, e.g. "you are a clever boy/girl", are obsessed with maintaining the outward appearance of their intelligent status, concerned that if they work hard, make mistakes and lack information, they will appear to be dumb (Dweck, 1999). When these children are faced with adverse feedback on their work, they are therefore more likely to believe that it is a result of mistaken identity – that they are not as intelligent as they were led to believe – and as innate intelligence is something they have no control over, they are more likely to lose self-esteem, doubt their own self-efficacy, become overwhelmed by hopelessness, and give up.

In contrast, children with adaptive patterns focus on the effort and strategies needed to master a task, feel challenged by their mistakes and are motivated to find out more. It has been recommended that children should be provided with challenging work and praised for their effort and hard work rather than be praised for being clever – even if the praise is motivated by the aim to raise self-esteem. This change, separating the person from the action and moving the emphasis from the cleverness of the achievement to the effort and method used, is likely to make a difference in children with maladaptive perfectionism. Findings indicate that it is even possible to modify the learning behaviour and views of college-aged students (Dweck, 1999), so it should be achievable to address perfectionism in much younger children who may mistakenly believe that giftedness is synonymous with an entitlement to achieve without effort or commitment. All that is needed is a consistent effort to change what we praise.

References


Mimri Weilisch is presenting at the NZAGC conference in Auckland in March.

Mimri Weilisch is an early childhood educator and a registered psychologist. Mimri has taught in many areas of early childhood over a 25 year period, including in multi-cultural long day care and preschools both in Sydney and country NSW. Her Master in Early Childhood focussed on early childhood teacher attitudes to young gifted children. Mimri is currently doing a PhD on gifted children. She is also Director of a gifted consultancy in Sydney. She is the published author of four books on early childhood activities as well as a booklet on the effects of television violence. She has presented numerous papers at conferences and is the published author of journal articles in the areas of her interests and research activities. Mimri is also a workshop trainer. More recently, she has been engaged to present behaviour management, strength-based programming, play, literacy and other workshops for the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER).