



Interview Article

An interview with Linda Silverman: What is giftedness—2023?

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Article Info

Received: 30 June 2023

Accepted: 29 September 2023

Online: 30 September 2023

Keywords

Gifted education

Interview with Linda Silverman

Psychology of gifted

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Abstract

Linda Silverman is an important scientist known worldwide for his work on psychology of gifted and giftedness. We asked him questions on important issues related to her research field and he answered sincerely. We would like to state that this interview contains important codes for researchers and practitioners study on the field of gifted education.

To cite this article:

Shaughnessy, M.F. (2023). An interview with Linda Silverman: What is giftedness—2023? *Journal of Gifted Education and Creativity*, 10(3), 269-274.



Michael Shaughnessy: Can you provide a brief bio about yourself, your education and your experiences?

Linda Silverman: Linda Kreger Silverman, Ph.D., is a licensed psychologist, and is the founder and director of Gifted Development Center/ISAD (GDC). Since 1979, Gifted Developmental Center has assessed more than 6,500 children, most of whom are twice exceptional.

After receiving her Ph.D. from USC in Educational Psychology/Special Education, she served for nine years on the faculty of the University of Denver in counseling psychology and gifted education. Linda has been studying the assessment, psychology and education of the gifted and twice exceptional since 1961.

She has over 300 contributions, including *Counseling the Gifted & Talented*, *Upside-Down Brilliance: The Visual-Spatial Learner*, *Advanced Development: A Collection of Works on Gifted Adults*, and *Giftedness 101*. She founded *Advanced Development*, the only juried psychological journal on adult giftedness.

Michael Shaughnessy: About how many children and adolescents have you actually tested?

Linda Silverman: In the last 44 years, GDC has tested over 6,500 children. We are a research center as well as an assessment center. We have the largest data bank of exceptionally and profoundly gifted children, with IQ scores of 160 or above. In the first ten years, approximately one-sixth of the children we tested were twice exceptional. In the last ten years over 90% of our clients are 2e. Our database is available to graduate students and researchers.

Michael Shaughnessy: Now, of those 2e children, what exceptionality seems to be the vast majority?

Linda Silverman: Throughout our practice, more children have shown visual processing deficits than any other exceptionality. This was apparent in low Processing Speed scores and other visually presented subtests. In the last year, most of our clients have had ADHD, and a growing number have symptoms of ASD. We have developed a *Checklist for Recognizing Twice Exceptional Children*, which includes 17 general 2e characteristics, as well as symptoms of visual processing deficits, central auditory processing disorder, sensory processing disorder, ADHD, dyslexia, ASD, and anxiety and depression. This tool has helped parents become aware of the multi-exceptionalities in their children.

Michael Shaughnessy: How is your philosophy different from talent development?

Linda Silverman: I see giftedness as REAL, not as a social construct. It has deep implications for the psychological well-being of the individual throughout the lifespan. Giftedness is innate. Gifted children ask about the meaning of life when others are just trying to figure out how to tie their shoes. You see it in 2 year olds and 92 year olds. Giftedness doesn't go away—even if the person does not become famous. When giftedness is defined as potential for eminence, it is achievement-based. Achievement, especially recognized achievement, is culturally bound. It favors those who are affluent. The vast majority of the world's gifted population are poor, for whom eminence is unreachable.

I believe that giftedness is color blind: it is apparent in all ethnic, cultural and national groups. I see giftedness as developmental advancement. In all cultures, there are children who:

- Develop at a faster pace from early childhood on
- Are inquisitive to a greater degree than age mates
- Generalize concepts earlier than their peers
- Demonstrate advanced verbal or spatial capacities at an early age
- Have superb memories
- Grasp abstract concepts
- Love to learn
- Have a sophisticated sense of humor
- Prefer complexity
- Are extraordinarily insightful
- Have a passion for justice
- Are profoundly aware
- Experience life with great intensity

Achievement-based definitions (including talent development) are also prejudicial against the neuro-diverse. You have to DO something unusual to be recognized as talented (e.g., be a talented pianist). Neuro-diverse children develop atypically, due to one or more learning or emotional differences. Neuro-diverse gifted individuals may not demonstrate talents or do well in school; yet they ask probing questions; they feel things deeply; they are fascinated by their passions (which may or may not be considered worthy of recognition).

Michael Shaughnessy: In my own work, I have seen that gifted kids seem to experience being an outsider, with no one to relate to and few friends. What are your thoughts?

Linda Silverman: I completely agree. Few people “get” the experience of being gifted—being an outsider in a society suspicious of outsiders. I started my chapter on “Counseling Asynchronous Students,” in the *Handbook for Counselors Serving Students with Gifts & Talents* (T. L. Cross & J. R. Cross, editors) with the following paragraph:

“Disguised as cunningly as espionage agents, gifted students pass for normal. They play the game and avert exposure. The rules are ‘never reveal anything that will make you stand out,’ ‘act like everybody else,’ and ‘do not draw attention to yourself.’ The gifted excel at the art of imitation, but the cost of leading a double life is inauthenticity, self-alienation, and inner conflict (not to mention the pain of having no one to celebrate their successes). Especially where provisions for advanced students are inadequate, the gifted tend to camouflage their abilities to try to blend in with their classmates—a prescription for loneliness.”

Michael Shaughnessy: Are the gifted emotionally sensitive? If so, where does this come from?

Linda Silverman: Yes, I see a strong correlation between high IQ scores and emotional sensitivity. Not only do gifted individuals think differently; they also feel differently. I believe the cause of emotional sensitivity is innate emotional overexcitability. The gifted are wired to respond with greater emotional intensity. Emotional sensitivity is a good thing. It needs to be understood. See the new book, *Sensitive*, by Jen Granneman and Andre Solo.

Michael Shaughnessy: Let's talk interventions—acceleration or enrichment or something else?

Linda Silverman: I have found that gifted children need each other more than anything else. I am a big fan of schools and programs for the gifted, where gifted children have close contact with others like themselves. If a school or full-day program is not available, children who are exceptionally advanced or highly gifted should be given the opportunity to accelerate. GDC offers an acceleration study to see if the child is a good candidate for subject or full-grade acceleration. Homeschooling is also an option that should be seriously considered. Enrichment and differentiation are likely to have less impact on the lives of gifted children. School districts often eliminate enrichment programs, considering them “frills.” Differentiation is complicated and depends on the skills of a specific teacher. (“We had a gifted program. She moved.”)

Michael Shaughnessy: I have been documenting giftedness myself, starting with the WISC-R, and we are now at the WISC-V. Have we gotten better at using these tests? Or how do we need to shift gears?

Linda Silverman: Yes, we have gotten better, but the ways are well-kept secrets. Pearson has not put extended norms and expanded index scores in their manuals. Examiners need to know that these are available on the Pearson website. I developed the Expanded General Ability Index (EGAI), which consists of 4 verbal subtests, 2 spatial subtests, and 2 mathematical subtests. It is a powerful indicator of giftedness. The EGAI requires administering 3 supplemental subtests that most psychologists do not give: Comprehension, Information, and Arithmetic. I strongly recommend that all examiners of the gifted administer these additional subtests. NAGC has posted position statements about the use of the WISC-IV and the WISC-V, but many examiners do not know about them. That is why I am offering a series of courses to help psychological examiners understand the nuances of assessing the gifted.

Michael Shaughnessy: Can you tell us a bit about these courses?

Linda Silverman: In April of 2023, Gifted Development Center began a collaboration with Supporting Emotional Needs of the Gifted (SENG) to offer a series of professional development courses for psychologists and examiners of gifted and twice exceptional children. The series generates APA Continuing Education Units (CEUs), but others could enroll without earning the APA CEUs. The courses are also of interest to university instructors in gifted education, school counselors, therapists, coordinators of gifted programs, Directors of Admission at schools for the gifted, teachers, and parents.

The three courses for 2023 include “What is giftedness?” (April 27th), “New Ways to Identify Twice Exceptional Children on the WISC-V” (May 25th), and “Assessing Gifted Children with Dyslexia” (June 22nd). I am offering the first two courses. Drs. Brock and Fernet Eide, neurologists, will present the third course, June 22nd. They have recently released *The Dyslexic Advantage* (revised and updated). In 2024, we will offer four more courses on expanded index scores on the WISC-V, extended norms, using the DAS-II with the gifted (a new normative update is due to be released in May 2023), and assessing gifted children with ADHD or ASD by Dr. Deirdre Lovecky. Her book, *Different Minds: Gifted Children with ADHD, ASD, and other Dual Exceptionalities* (2nd ed.) will be released in June 2023.

All lectures are recorded so that individuals can order the sessions they missed. For more information, go to www.gifteddevelopment.org.

The first course was “What is Giftedness?” It involved the following principles:

Giftedness:

- Involves developmental differences in abstract reasoning, emotional sensitivity, and intensity.
- Is the experience of being an outsider.
- Can be observed in very young children.
- Can be documented on measures of general intelligence.
- Is lifelong.
- Creates qualitatively different life experiences.
- Leads to a set of issues unique to this group, making them vulnerable.
- Indicates significantly different needs from the norm.
- Requires early identification, intervention and accommodations to assure healthy development.

Michael Shaughnessy: Two tangential areas: creativity and talent. Do you address these realms?

Linda Silverman: Not specifically. Academics tend to focus on creativity and talent development. I believe gifted individuals are generally creative. In Polish, there is no word for “giftedness.” Kazimierz Dabrowski studied creative individuals. That is how “overexcitabilities” were first observed. I am opposed to the idea of substituting “talented” for “gifted.” They are two different populations with very different needs. The talented fit in better socially than those who are gifted.

Michael Shaughnessy: What else have I neglected to ask?

Linda Silverman: I would like to share how my education undergirds my perspective. I come from a special education background. I see giftedness as the mirror image of intellectual disability. No one thinks intellectual disability is simply a “social construct.” At 2 SD above the norm, as with individuals 2 SD below the norm, there are SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCES that need to be addressed. The same cannot be said of those who are in the top 10% and the lowest 10%. If we took all the children in the lowest 10% of the school population and placed them in programs for the intellectually disabled, we would be in court within the day.

The talented come from a broader spectrum. Those in the top 2-3% can be overlooked when they are placed in programs for children in the top 10%. I believe that we need to recognize degrees of giftedness: mildly, moderately, highly, exceptionally and profoundly. Degrees of severity are recognized at the bottom end of the spectrum. Every standard deviation is a functional difference. Children 5 SD below the norm do not group well with children 2 SD below the norm. The same is true for children who are 2 SDs above the norm and those who are 5 SDs above the norm. Those who study the profoundly gifted have very different perceptions of what giftedness is from those who are interested in developing talents in the top 10%, 25% or 33% of the population. While developing talents is a noble cause, it does not meet the unique needs of children who are significantly different from 98% of the school population.

Michael Shaughnessy: I am pretty sure giftedness is lifelong—you are still working hard, helping, consulting, doing workshops (I get tired just listing them all). How do you do it?

Linda Silverman: I’m on a mission! That gives me the energy I need to continue to help families, even at the age of 82.

Autobiography of Linda Silverman



Linda Kreger Silverman, Ph.D., is a licensed psychologist, and is the founder and director of Gifted Development Center/ISAD (GDC). Since 1979, Gifted Developmental Center has assessed more than 6,500 children, most of whom are twice exceptional. After receiving her Ph.D. from USC in Educational Psychology/Special Education, she served for nine years on the faculty of the University of Denver in counseling psychology and gifted education. Linda has been studying the assessment, psychology and education of the gifted and twice exceptional since 1961. She has over 300 contributions, including *Counseling the Gifted & Talented*, *Upside-Down Brilliance: The Visual-Spatial Learner*, *Advanced Development: A Collection of Works on Gifted Adults*, and *Giftedness 101*. She founded *Advanced Development*, the only juried psychological journal on adult giftedness. Web: <https://gifteddevelopment.org/linda-silverman>

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