

21 Years With the Dabrowski Theory: An Autoethnography

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ABSTRACT: This autoethnography gives a personal and cultural account of my work with the Dabrowski theory. I have administered the Overexcitability Questionnaire (OEQ) and the Overexcitability Questionnaire II (OEQ-II) to 16 cohorts of talented high school sophomores and juniors (N = 600+). I have written about much of this in my books, but the studies have not appeared in the journal literature, though they have been presented at national and international conferences. Comparison studies have been done with both instruments. In addition, I organized three of the first Dabrowski conferences in the U.S., edited a newsletter, and my graduate students used the OEQs in their own studies. In this autoethnographic account, I describe several studies with the OEQ and the OEQ-II. The appeal of the Dabrowski theory itself, as it posits levels of adult development gained through reactions to challenges, seems to appeal to people by means that seem to be mysterious and mythic.

This study is an attempt to summarize some of the work that I have done with the Dabrowski theory since 1989. Publication of this work has been in my books, to illustrate various points and theories, and in conference presentations; and thus my 21 years of both qualitative and quantitative work within this theory is not cited nor referred to in the literature, although researchers might want the information when they themselves are doing their Dabrowski-based studies. Thus, in this paper, I have used the qualitative research genre of autoethnography to attempt to condense these years of study and to publish them in the journal literature.

Theoretical Framework of Autoethnography

An autoethnography is the study of the self within a certain culture (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Hayano, 1979). Much work is currently being done in the qualitative research world with autoethnography (Davies, 1999; Denzin & Lincoln, 1999; Hanson, 2004; Reed-Danahy, 1997). For example, autoethnographies now occupy a respected place at such qualitative research conferences as the International Conference on Qualitative Research at the University of Illinois and the Qualitative Interest Group Conference at the University of Georgia. Perusing the programs for these conferences shows that about 1 in 15 studies is an autoethnography.

Patton (2002) called autoethnography “the latest and still emergent” qualitative research approach (p. 84). While classic ethnography was enthralled with “the other,” or the “etic,” perspective (the perspective whereby the researcher seeks detachment from the material), the autoethnographer seeks to present the “emic” perspective, the perspective of the insider within the culture being discussed. The postmodern or postcolonial stance of recent qualitative research has raised the consciousness of researchers about issues of power, class, and influence (Hatch, 2002).

As Patton (2002) said, “In autoethnography, then, you use your own experiences to garner insights into the larger culture or subculture of which you are a part” (p. 86). The culture being described in this autoethnography is the Dabrowski theory culture within the field of gifted education. The “auto” is my self and work within this culture for the past two decades. A critical stance is assumed in autoethnographies. The researcher seeks to understand his or her place within the culture being discussed, to critique the roles of power and class, to uncover ideologies, and to bracket blinders. As Ellis (2004) said, the autoethnographer starts with the “I,” the personal, paying attention to one’s “feelings, thoughts, and emotions,” using “emotional recall” in order to “understand an experience” she has lived. She then writes her experience “as a story” (p. xvii).

Ethnography has been a staple in the fields of anthropology and sociology, but not in psychology, which has sought to be “scientific,” and which has been reluctant to accept qualitative research as “real” research. Psychology has been the parent discipline of education, and of the journals in gifted education, as many of the editors and members of the research boards are in educational psychology departments. Autoethnography has been viewed as too personal, and few, if any, studies using this methodology exist in the gifted psychology and education literature. The closest may be my own article, a portrait (after Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman-Davis, 1997) of the Jnana Prabhodini School for the gifted in Pune, India (Piirto,

2002). Reflexivity, the concept that one reflects on one's own work and one's place in it, "bracketing" (Moustakas, 1994) one's biases so that one may be "objective" about the phenomenon being researched, has a large place in the discussions of autoethnography. However, it is important to recognize, in the post-structuralist sense, that it is virtually impossible to "bracket" (though the attempt should be made), because all is fraught with bias. There are only multiple realities, not one reality; the autoethnographer seeks to describe a phenomenon through the personal, recognizing that her account is only one that could be made about the same phenomenon. Thus, as Shank (2002) said, it is not possible to know how a setting and culture impact real lives, "unless we know them from the view of those who are involved, in their own words" (p. 60).

Judging the quality of autoethnography, because it is nontraditional, is difficult. Richardson (cited in Patton, 2002), listed five criteria:

1. *Substantive contribution*: Does the writer demonstrate a deeply grounded (if embedded) social scientific perspective?
2. *Aesthetic merit*: Does the use of creative analytic practices open up the text, invite interpretive responses?
3. *Reflexivity*: How has the author's subjectivity been both a producer and a product of this text?
4. *Impact*: Does this affect me? Emotionally? Intellectually?
5. *Expression of a reality*: Does this text embody a fleshed out, embodied sense of lived experience? Does it seem a "true"—a credible—account of a cultural, social, individual, or communal sense of the "real"? (p. 87)

Overview of the Overexcitabilities in the Dabrowski Theory

A growing body of research has used the Dabrowski Theory of Positive Disintegration (Dabrowski, 1977; Dabrowski & Piechowski, 1977) to describe the personality attributes and development of gifted and talented children, adolescents, and adults (e.g., Daniels & Piechowski, 2009; Mendaglio, 2008; Piechowski, 2006; Piirto, 2004). The theory of positive disintegration (TPD) is a 5-level hierarchical theory of human development. Lower levels of development must be torn down before higher levels can be attained. Dabrowski theorized that the highest levels of development are reached by people who possess high levels of emotional, intellectual, and imaginal overexcitability (OE) (Dabrowski, 1964).

The overexcitabilities are a unique contribution to psychological theory, and the research described here concerns instruments which have been developed to measure overexcitabilities.

Other instruments such as the Definition Response Instrument exist to measure the levels, but these are not discussed here. Overexcitability is “an innate tendency to respond with heightened intensity and sensitivity to intellectual, emotional, and other stimuli, also called psychic overexcitability” (Piechowski, 1999, p. 325). Kazimierz Dabrowski (1964, 1967, 1970, 1972, 1977), according to his major translator, Michael Piechowski, saw these overexcitabilities as a higher form of adjustment on a continuum of levels of adjustment. “To varying degrees, these five dimensions give talent its power,” said Piechowski (1997, p. 366). Piechowski assisted researchers in better understanding the relationship of overexcitabilities to the theory of positive disintegration with numerous studies of emotional and spiritual intelligence (Piechowski, 1979, 1991, 1997, 1999, 2006, 2008; Piechowski & Colangelo, 1984; Piechowski & Cunningham, 1985; Piechowski & Miller, 1995; Piechowski, Silverman, & Falk, 1985). The need to investigate overexcitabilities on a cross-cultural level may provide new understanding to the use of overexcitabilities with talented children and youth.

The five overexcitabilities are Psychomotor, Sensual, Imaginational, Emotional, and Intellectual. Piechowski (1991, p. 287) described them this way:

Psychomotor Overexcitability—an augmented capacity for being active and energetic—expressed as movement, restlessness, drivenness;

Sensual overexcitability—an enhanced differentiation and aliveness of sensual experience;

Intellectual overexcitability—avidity for knowledge and the search for truth—expressed as passion for discovery, questioning, love of ideas and theoretical analysis;

Imaginational overexcitability—the power of thought creation—expressed through vividness of imagery, richness of association, liking for the unusual, and a facility for dreams, fantasies, and inventions;

Emotional overexcitability—the heart—recognized in the great depth and intensity of emotional life expressed through a wide range of feelings, attachments, compassion, heightened sense of responsibility, and scrupulous self-examination.

These overexcitabilities have been also called *sensitivities* and *intensities* (Piechowski, 2006). Piechowski (1999) said, “the difference in intensity, sensitivity, and acuity is not only greater than normal, it is also a difference in the very quality of experiencing” (p. 325). The presence of the overexcitabilities contributes to what is called *developmental potential*. Developmental potential contributes to adult creativity, and includes, besides OE, the presence of intelligence, talents, abilities, and development.

One of the emerging ideas about academically talented students has been that they possess higher overexcitability—that they are

more sensitive and intense than students who do not have high scores on IQ or achievement tests (O'Connor, 2002; Piechowski & Colangelo, 1984; Pyryt, 2008; Schiever, 1985; Silverman, 1993; Silverman & Ellsworth, 1981; Tucker & Hafenstein, 1997). There have been on-going discussions about the most appropriate means to determine the OEs for individuals or groups.

Method

The method of the present study was qualitative. However, much of the work described herein was quantitative. Four intentions governed this study: (1) My “story” as a Dabrowski researcher since 1989; (2) summaries of the studies my colleagues and I have done; (3) a summary of a dissertation that arose from the other studies described here; (4) summaries of what has been included in my books. Thus, this study is, perhaps, unique in its utilizing of an odd mixed methods approach; the accretion and then condensation of our work with the Overexcitability Questionnaire (OEQ) and the Overexcitability Questionnaire II (OEQ-II). These will be interwoven with a narrative.

I have administered the OEQ and the OEQ-II to talented teenagers and to adult creators over a period of 21 years. This autoethnographic account will summarize how the findings of the studies have influenced my own thought about the Dabrowski theory, for, as Ellis (2004) said autoethnography is “research, writing, story, and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political” (p. xix). I will also make some comments about the use of these instruments in gifted education. This study will also seek to understand the Dabrowski cultural ideology and its ascent within the larger culture of the field called gifted education.

The Autoethnographic Account

It all began in 1989, during the first year in the job I still have, as a professor at a small private university in Ohio, teaching the courses leading to an endorsement in gifted education. I had just come from a job on the east coast as principal of the Hunter College Elementary School, a laboratory school for children with high IQs. I was on tenure track and needed to fill out my research line. I was interested in creativity and had published a couple of articles in that area; I was also interested in social and emotional issues, as I was a former guidance counselor with a degree in school counseling. While perusing the *Journal of Creative Behavior*, I saw an article by Piechowski and Cunningham (1985), called “Patterns of Overexcitability in a Group

of Artists,” a title which was right up my alley, for wasn’t I an artist? Wasn’t I quite excitable? The article contained a copy of the Overexcitability Questionnaire (OEQ). I studied the questionnaire and copied it, deciding to use it to assess the talented teenagers I would be meeting during a summer honors institute our university had just been granted from the state Department of Education. This was the first of 19 grants we have received since that year. I obtained informed consent from the students and their parents, and administered these (and other) personality and creativity instruments, e.g., Adjective Check List (ACL), SOI Divergent Production tests (DFU, DMU, DSU).

Initially, I was interested in replicating what older studies had shown about the talented; and, later in the 1990s, after formulating my idea of the Piirto Pyramid of Talent Development, my own theoretical framework (Piirto, 1994), I wanted to confirm or deny the presence of certain personality attributes that I had listed in this theoretical framework. Over the years I have administered many instruments to the talented teenagers at our summer honors institutes, among them the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), the High School Personality Questionnaire (HSPQ), and the Rokeach Values Survey (RVS). I have published these results in journals in our field and presented the results at research conferences, so these will not be discussed here.

I showed Mary Meeker (the originator of the Structure of Intellect movement in gifted education and a mentor of mine, as I was one of their advanced trainers, traveling about the country helping people learn about the Guilford theory as modified by Meeker) the questionnaire from Piechowski and Cunningham (1985). She suggested that dreams might be an interesting avenue of inquiry as well, whether or not I included this in the scoring. I added one question, “To what extent do your dreams influence you?” as I had an interest also in depth psychology and in dream interpretation within that ideology. I had taken a couple of Jungian dream courses and was reading within that literature. I may use these responses in another paper or study. This was the innocent and unideological beginning of my years with Dabrowski.

I knew nothing about the theory and had bare acquaintance with the term overexcitability. However, I enlisted help from a colleague, David Kowalka, a local teacher who was teaching a creativity session at the honors institute. This was a musical theater experience for the students, and after the students (and artist faculty) filled out the questionnaire, we audiotaped them in interviews, taking them back through their answers to the questions one by one. David interviewed the boys and I interviewed the girls in a room in our Arts and Humanities building. Later that year, I paid an undergraduate student to transcribe them. The tapes and transcriptions still sit in my attic. Now, how would I score them? I had an interest in assessment from my work with the Structure of Intellect Learning Abilities Test

(SOI-LA) and my participation in that ideology during the 1970s and 1980s within the field of gifted education, and I loved to create distributions of scores and run statistics on them. I contacted Linda Silverman, whom I knew a little, and who, I recalled, had spoken about the Dabrowski theory in some speech or another I had heard. She had been involved with the Dabrowski thinkers since the early 1980s (Silverman & Ellsworth, 1981), and she had been in a study group about the theory with like-minded colleagues at the University of Denver. She informed me that two of the major researchers had just moved nearby, to the University of Akron, and I contacted Frank Falk and Nancy Miller and had a drink with them at a creativity conference at which I was speaking in Akron. “Teach me how to score this,” I said. “I am sitting on a lot of questionnaires, but I don’t know what they mean.”

They informed me that scoring the questionnaires took a lot of training, and they could not tell me how to score them in just an hour or so. I then devised a way to learn to score them. I proposed organizing a Dabrowski theory conference at my university that summer, with scoring the OEQ as the major effort. Michael Piechowski, Linda Silverman, Nancy Miller, and Frank Falk were the speakers. I advertised widely and about 35 people came from the U.S. and Canada. To my knowledge, it was the first Dabrowski Conference sponsored by a gifted education program in the U.S. The year was 1990.

At the conference, these four speakers took turns teaching us. I recall Linda Silverman discussing overexcitabilities in infants and young children in the Library Lecture Room, explaining that the behaviors of young gifted children showed that they were very intense and overexcitable. David Kowalka had a personal camera that used VHS technology, and he taped all the lectures. I still have them on my office shelf.

Michael Piechowski discussed the definitions within the theory, the levels of development that Dabrowski had proposed, his work in helping Dabrowski translate the theory into English when they both taught at the University of Alberta, his and Dabrowski’s book (Dabrowski, 1977; Dabrowski & Piechowski, 1977), and Piechowski’s subsequent work in trying to find exemplars for Level V, the highest level in this hierarchical theory. He quietly read to us, in Room 212 in the education building, the transcript that he came to call the “Ashley” materials, the odyssey of a woman academic like myself, who ended up leaving her position at a research university for a small liberal arts college where she could devote herself to teaching, as she rose on the Positive Disintegration hierarchy. I remember the group sitting quietly at separate tables during lunch, deeply moved and spiritually touched by the materials. As one of my master’s students who was attending, an elementary teacher, told me, “This is very deep.” We re-entered that classroom in Bixler Hall after lunch, transformed by these transcripts he was reading as illustrations of the theory.

Nancy Miller (1985), a sociologist and qualitative researcher, had developed a scoring system (Miller Assessment Coding System [MACS]) for coding levels of development from responses to The Definition Response Instrument (Gage, Morse, & Piechowski, 1981); and she and her husband, Frank Falk, also a sociologist, had been developing the holistic scoring system for the Overexcitability Questionnaire along with Michael Piechowski, Linda Silverman, and other colleagues who knew the theory. In the afternoons they taught us how to score it. The scoring system was developed to give a numerical value to the overexcitability (OE)—the higher the number, the more present the OE. We struggled to find consensus on the models we were attempting to score. We laughed, took a field trip to a rural restaurant, and those of us who sing, sang old songs around the piano at my house. The dormitory where they stayed was not air-conditioned, and I remember offering Linda Silverman a bath in the claw foot tub in my old house, and I remember drawing that bath and bringing her bubble bath and clean towels. The participants said they got to know each other better than they would have otherwise, though, in late-night conversations in the dormitory lounge. That fall I put out a newsletter, *The Dabrowski Gazette*, for the group, so we could stay in touch.

The next year, 1991, we did it again, and about the same number of people came, a few the same, but mostly new people to the theory. That year Michael Piechowski brought the autobiography of Etty Hillesum, a Dutch woman from World War II who had died in the concentration camp (Hillesum, 1985), and he had begun to wonder whether Peace Pilgrim (1983) had reached Level V. He later published data from these wonderings in his chapters in the *Handbook of Gifted Education* (Piechowski, 1997, 2003).

In 1992, we had the third conference to be held at our small university. At this conference, several old friends who had met through conferences on the highly gifted attended. They planned to meet after our conference to formulate a new definition of giftedness. They were women, and thought that a theory posed by women would not be accepted. I published their definition of asynchronous development and their assertion that those with high IQs were different, emotionally, than other children, in my textbook in 1999.

Among the other attendees at these conferences were people who later wrote their dissertations and master's theses on the Dabrowski theory (Ackerman, 1993, 1997, 1998, 1999; Breard, 1995; Ely, 1995). I later began to think that perhaps these three years of conferences at our small university began to build a critical mass about the theory within the field. People wanted alternative ways to identify gifted students. Ackerman (1998) found that the OEQ did seem to discriminate between gifted and nongifted people. Breard used the OEQ to explore identifying African American students in South Carolina. Ely used it to identify creative seventh graders. Others came to the conference to investigate alternative methods of identifying

gifted students, exploring whether the OEQ could be used to do that (Domroese, 1994).

We learned how to score the OEQ, with instruction from Miller, Piechowski, Falk, and Silverman, with Piechowski as the final word. Another coder training session was held at Myrtle Beach, SC, in early 1991, led by Falk and Miller, and one of my graduate students, Geri Cassone, attended and became certified. She was the volunteer administrator for the coding efforts for a few years. I didn't want to become a coder, as I found the process tedious and boring. Too many years of grading freshman college themes, I guess. I got the drift of how to do it, during the sessions at the conferences, but I decided I would rather pay for the scoring than do it myself. Two raters scored each questionnaire, with a third rater solving ties. This is a common way to score essays.

Some became spokespersons for the Dabrowski theory, giving workshops and speaking at conferences, and worked with Falk and Miller on the scoring manual (e.g., Sharon Lind) (see Falk & Piechowski, 1991; Falk, Piechowski, & Lind, 1994). The conference moved to other venues after that, but I still continued to administer the OEQ to cohorts of talented teenagers each summer and to pay the coders to score them (from my own pocket).

I used the data in the first edition of *Understanding Those Who Create* (Piirto, 1992), when I commented on the presence of imaginary friends in talented young theater people: "Interviewer: Did you ever have an imaginary playmate?" Student: "Yeah. I had a guy named John Hutchins" (p. 94). Though the OEQ didn't contain a question about imaginary playmates, many of the students we interviewed stated that they had them, in answer to the question about imagining things that are not there. This is when I realized that the data that the OEQ provided has other than holistic scoring value; that it could have qualitative research value in what the talented, or those who fill it out, are like. I wrote that I wanted to use the OEQ in a qualitative way rather than in the way of the coders scoring *how much*: "The rigors of interrater scoring and rating preclude widespread use of such a questionnaire until the number of active researchers grows, but the anecdotal and personal knowledge that we gained seems just as important" (Piirto, 1992, p. 95).

James Webb, my publisher (Ohio Psychology Press, then Gifted Psychology Press, now Great Potential Press) for *Understanding Those Who Create*, had noticed the sections on the Dabrowski theory in the 1992 edition of the book, and he said, "It's time that we talk about the Dabrowski theory at the SENG conference. Would you present a session?" I did so at their conference in Minneapolis, in 1993, and they made a recording of it, which was sold. I lent this tape to my students, for by 1992, I had incorporated the Dabrowski theory into the graduate Talent Development Education class on the guidance and counseling of the talented, ED 653. Something mysterious happened to my students when they read the Nelson (1989)

article, and Piechowski's (1979, 1991) chapters, and they quieted down and seemed to have some transformation into a spiritual recognition, especially with the explanation of the levels and of the overexcitabilities. One student wrote her biographical study in the creativity class, ED 654, on Audrey Hepburn, asserting that Hepburn had reached Level V when she became a spokesperson for UNICEF.

I remember speaking for the Michigan Association for the Gifted in Saginaw that year, and experiencing the same quiet attention from the audience when I explained the theory. My students, like Piechowski, were also engaged in trying to find Level Vs. I myself seemed to have settled into multileveledness, perhaps verging into Level IV once in awhile. I sing, and I sang in recollection, for my students, our "camp song" at one of the Dabrowski conferences, where we sang, to the tune of Allan Friedman's "Hello Mudda, Hello Fadda" our invocation to our own multileveledness, hoping we were at Level IV, but probably still at III.

I continued collecting OEQ data from the talented adolescents until 2001, paying them \$5.00 each for filling out the cumbersome questionnaire. I remember the assistant director of the honors institute, Jennifer Allen, keeping five-dollar bills in her jeans, to hand to the students as they handed her the completed OEQs. Cassone continued to work with me organizing the rater scoring, and we presented two studies at the Banff, Alberta, Canada Dabrowski conference in 1996 (Piirto, Cassone, & Fraas, 1996; Piirto, Cassone, Ackerman, & Fraas, 1996). At this conference, I was surprised at the revelation of divisions within the Dabrowski community, between the original Canadians who had studied with Dabrowski himself, and those who were advocating the use of the theory in gifted education. The U.S. researchers were interested in the overexcitabilities and the instruments for measuring them, and the Canadians were interested in the theory of adult development as Dabrowski proposed it. I remember the papers of the Canadians, who focused on adult development and memories of days with Dabrowski. I remember the helicopter ride organized by Bill Tillier, one of the Canadian organizers (along with Michael Pyryt and Sal Mendaglio), which swooped us into the Canadian Rockies in a most scary and spectacular manner. Tillier later organized a list serve on Dabrowski, to which I belonged for a few months. On this list, the international debates raged. The studies we presented in Canada confirmed the presence of overexcitabilities in students who took summer honors institute courses in music, theater, science, mathematics, and business. Since all the students were identified as gifted and talented, we concluded that the presence of overexcitabilities was confirmed in gifted and talented adolescents, no matter the domain. When I say "presence," I mean that the mean score of the coded OEQs was over 3, above average.

By the time I published the 2nd edition of *Understanding Those Who Create* (Pirto, 1998), I had about 140 filled-out questionnaires, not including about 20 from adult creators. In that edition, I wrote about what I had found out and presented at the conferences. To summarize, we found out that creative and visual and performing arts-identified teenagers who came to the honors camp to study musical theater, creative writing, and visual arts, had higher imaginal overexcitability than academically talented students who did not study theater, writing, and visual arts (those who chose science and math). This would be expected. These results are similar to those that Piechowski and Cunningham (1985) found in adult creative artists, except they also found that the creative people were also higher than others in emotional overexcitability. We found no differences; both groups were high in emotional overexcitability.

The Flint, Schottke, & Willmore (1997) Study

Several of my graduate students used the data from these OEQs for their master's capstones (e.g., Flint, Schottke, & Willmore, 1997). I asked them to analyze 100 OEQs from students at the honors institutes in 1989, 1991, and 1995, for themes, rather than score them with the rater system, and they found four themes that characterized the responses of the gifted students: they showed hypersensitivity, they had a heightened sense of a god and life in other forms, they loved performing, and they loved to argue with themselves and others. One student described her hypersensitivity (overexcitability) as "hyperness": "My heartbeat increases, even if I am only intellectually excited. I get very talkative and I gesture a lot." I published some quotations from the Flint, et al. (1997) findings in the second edition of my textbook (Pirto, 1999).

The love of performing came out in this population, as one of the main themes for the Summer Honors Institute in 1989 and 1990 was musical theater. One female student said that being on stage made her feel "as if I'm soaring on a cloud with the angels singing beside me." She said that her "first love" is to perform: "The magic of the theater always seeps into my soul and grasps control of it. When I am acting, I am as happy, or happier, as any person can be."

One young athlete wrote of the joy of physical competition, and the similarity between the above response and his response helped lead to my thinking about including athletes in my creativity book (Pirto, 2004) in the performing talents chapter:

When the competition is high and I know I can take over the whole scene I use the energy to excel and raise my play up a notch. It is a feeling of freedom and an incredible high. It is a true freedom that unfortunately not everyone can feel. It is to be a winner.

The Vocational Comparison Study

One other graduate student, Robbin Rogers, administered the OEQ over a period of days to her high school English students in a

vocational school so we could compare the talented adolescents attending typical high schools with students who attended a vocational high school. Few, if any, comparison studies have been done using the OEQ with both gifted and regular participants. We presented that data at the European Council for High Ability (ECHA) conference in Debrecen, Hungary, and at the National Association for Gifted Children conference in Atlanta, in 2000 (Piirto, Beach, Cassone, Rogers, & Fraas, 2000). Our findings were both surprising and not surprising. Here is the abstract:

A comparison study was done in Ohio, USA. A group of 52 adolescents identified as gifted by IQ scores who were attending a special summer institute was compared with a group of 52 adolescents who attended a vocational high school who were not identified as gifted and talented. The Overexcitabilities Questionnaire (OEQ) was administered to both groups. MANOVA analyses were performed. Results of the comparison study showed that the academically talented high school adolescents were significantly higher in intellectual overexcitability (OE). All females were higher in emotional overexcitability. No other differences between the two groups were present.

This study, which compared vocational high school students with those identified by the Ohio Gifted Rule, marked a watershed for me. That there was little difference, if one really looked at the responses in a qualitative manner, between identified gifted students and vocational high school students was an important finding that I took to heart.

When Rogers, Fraas, Beach, and I sat around my kitchen table in the summer of 2000 with Falk, Miller, and Piechowski, discussing the results and how to present them in Hungary, we disagreed about whether the four very high scorers, who were all identified gifted students, three males and one female, should be included in the distribution, as there were so few males that their high scores would distort the mean. Miller and Piechowski felt they should be included. Piechowski also took exception with the term “outlier” to describe them. Falk, Fraas (our statistics adviser), Beach, and I thought they should not be included. We submitted the study to one of the journals in the field, and it was rejected because of this decision of mine. It was (is) a personal quandary for me: include very high scorers, or not? Skew the mean or not? Perhaps you can't skew a mean. A mean is a mean is a mean. I was a little miffed and felt overpowered by the reviewer's status within the process.

The Beach (2003) study

To investigate what such high OE looked like, Beach (2003), who was part of that late night kitchen table group after dinner at our town's Mexican restaurant, decided to do her dissertation studying these high scorers and one other high scorer on the OEQ. Five and

six years after they had attended the summer honors institute and filled in the OEQ, she tracked them down along country roads in Appalachian Midwest, working at the jewelry store at the mall; commuting to the local branch college from home; attending a fine private liberal arts college; and recovering from drug addiction. She took from my files their High School Personality Questionnaires (HSPQs) and their Myers-Briggs Type Indicators (MBTIs). She also administered to them the Rokeach Value Survey (RVS). Beach's mixed method study revealed the intense way in which these students viewed life, not only in high school, but also throughout college. She conducted three 90-minute interviews with each of them, based on the Seidman (1998) phenomenological interview protocol. I had the honor of advising this dissertation, entitled *Tall Poppies: Personality Characteristics of Gifted High School Students*. Piechowski's objection to excluding these very high scorers was taken care of by doing a special study on them, we felt. The high scorers were surprising in a certain way because while they were in college, their lives, except for one, were homebound, average, and somewhat sad.

An extreme score was operationally defined as one with a corresponding z score of at least 3.0, which represents the number of standard deviation units between the students' score and the mean score of the group. The results were presented in the form of individual case studies that incorporated both a personal narrative profile (Seidman, 1998) and a portrait (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman-Davis, 1997).

Like my former disenchantment with the Structure of Intellect-Learning Abilities (SOI-LA) test and its use for the gifted (after administering it to the Hunter College Elementary School students, I found out that the SOI-LA had a significant ceiling effect and did not discriminate at the highest levels, and thus was not suitable for diagnosing learning strengths and weaknesses of high-IQ students, contrary to what had been spoken about in the SOI ideology), I began to become disenchanted with the Dabrowski assessment instruments, no matter my fondness for their creators. The vocational results showed that the OEs in identified gifted and talented students, as scored by anonymous raters, were no different from those of vocational students passionate about what they were doing, for the most part, except for the very high scorers.

A Few Thoughts About Ideologies In Gifted Education

In any field, nascent theories about origins and behaviors often capture the imaginations and loyalties of researchers and practitioners. These may reach the status of ideologies, beliefs held to be true and determinant. Dissenters from these beliefs are often marginalized within the field. In 2000, several colleagues and I presented a session in the Conceptual Foundations Division at the National Association for Gifted Children meeting in Atlanta. "Is the

Psychology of Giftedness an Ideology?” was our topic (Piirto, Howley, Howley, & Peterson, 2000). We concluded that, indeed, one could say so. An ideology has these features: (1) Beliefs that seem to be transcendent, (2) a shared mythology which underlies the beliefs, (3) an esoteric language which is defined by experts, (4) inner operations that are mystical and veiled, and (5) basic assumptions about which the practitioners may not be aware. Among several grand narratives of the giftedness ideology, we mentioned this one: “Gifted people are different in emotions, in personality, and in sensitivity.”

Tides of theories arrive in our field (as in any), and are taken up as beliefs, supported by certain research studies and disproved by others. The current tide supporting acceleration as a positive strategy for educating those who score high on aptitude and achievement tests is an example. The tide with the Structure of Intellect in the 1970s was another; the tide about the goodness of differentiation (with little acknowledgement of its difficulty and frequent failure) is still current; the tide concerning the Dabrowski theory is another example. Is it true that those who score high on tests of intelligence are the only ones capable of achieving high levels of moral development? In 2007, in the third edition of my textbook, I wrote this: “The implication that people who are normal don’t reach the higher levels is, to this researcher, rather offensive . . . We just don’t know” (Piirto, 2007, p. 410).

OEQs of Creative Writers

I used a few of the OEQs in one other instance that was published or presented at a conference. This was in my book on creative writers (Piirto, 2002). Here I reproduced the OEQs of a poet, a playwright, and a nonfiction writer. The Piechowski and Cunningham (1985) study of artists had not used a publication or presentation criterion for the participants, who self-identified as artists, but who would, perhaps, not be called artists by their field’s gatekeepers. I wanted to see what real, peer-reviewed, published, award-winning writers would say. The reader can see the high degree of intensity with which these men approached life and see the difference among writers in different genres. Again, a qualitative approach to the evaluation of the questionnaires yields rich, thick data.

I thought that this concluded my use of the OEQ with raters and for qualitative descriptive purposes, but I was wrong. After reading the essays in the wonderful edited book, *Dabrowski’s Theory of Positive Disintegration* (Mendaglio, 2008), especially the Falk, Yakmaci-Guzel, Chang, Pardo, & Chavez-Eakle (2008) chapter and the Pyryt (2008) chapter, I decided to try again with the comparison study with the vocational and identified gifted high school students. In the spring of 2009 I revisited the 2000 comparison study. I contacted my statistics expert colleague, now retired, Dr. John Fraas, and we submitted a new version of the 2000 study (Piirto, Beach, Cassone, Rogers, & Fraas, 2000) after I added

more males. The study did not throw out high scorers, the practice Piechowski had objected to, but instead randomly chose them for the cells so that the numbers could be equal. I re-entered all coded data, which means 105 scores (21 questions x 5 scores) for each of the now 114 participants. We included effect sizes and compared the effect sizes with the OEQ-II study described below (Piirto, Montgomery, & May, 2008). The results were surprising in terms of gender, as the identified gifted boys scored very high, but the identified gifted girls were more similar to the vocational boys and girls than they were to the gifted boys. This study is still in submission at the time of this writing (Piirto & Fraas, 2009), and will be presented at the 2010 American Educational Research Association conference in Denver in May. Here is the abstract.

A comparison study (N = 114) of identified gifted (N = 61, M = 22, F = 39, mean age 15.9) and vocational high school students (N = 53, M = 27, F = 6, mean age 16) was conducted using the Overexcitability Questionnaire (OEQ). Each of the five types of OE scores was subjected to a two-way ANOVA with the students' classification and gender serving as the main effects. Any statistically significant interaction effect was further analyzed by testing the group means with six two-group comparison tests. The analyses produced the following results: (a) gifted males were higher than gifted females, vocational males, and vocational females in imaginal and intellectual overexcitability, and (b) there were no differences among the Psychomotor (P), Sensual (S), and Emotional (E) overexcitability means of the four groups. The effect sizes corresponding to these statistically significant differences were classified as large. A qualitative textual analysis of high scoring responses for both groups was conducted to illustrate these findings.

Perhaps I could change the title of this autoethnography to "forever with the Dabrowski theory," as I seem to be revisiting my data even when I think I am done.

The OEQ-II

Because of a demonstrated need among researchers, the Dabrowski-ites (Falk, Lind, Miller, Piechowski, & Silverman, 1999) created a Likert-questionnaire of 50 items that purports to assess the presence of OEs. It takes only ten minutes to administer and is also rather easy to score. I administered preliminary copies of the questionnaire to our talented adolescents, and my data were included in the convergent validity study (Falk, Piechowski, & Piirto, 2000).

I continued to administer the OEQ-II to the students to help build the number of gifted students who had taken it, and, with my colleague, Diane Montgomery, presented a study comparing Korean high school students with our students (Montgomery & Piirto, 2006;

Piirto, Montgomery, & May, 2008). Here is the abstract:

The differences between U.S. (Midwest) gifted and talented high school students and South Korean gifted and talented high school students on the *Overexcitabilities Questionnaire II* (OEQ-II) were investigated. The OEQ-II was administered to 270 Midwest identified gifted and talented high school students (M = 88, F = 139) and to 341 high school students from four specialized high schools (one for science, one for foreign language, and 2 for the arts) in Seoul, Korea (M = 117, F = 224). Results confirmed the presence of overexcitabilities in both populations. MANOVA by gender and country revealed that Korean males and females scored higher in Psychomotor OE and that U.S. males and females scored higher in Imaginational OE. No differences were found in Intellectual OE, Emotional OE, or Sensual OE.

I have recently administered the OEQ-II to the teachers of the talented whom I teach. Preliminary results indicate that they also score above the mean on all the OEs, but I have to wait until I can grow my "n." I have my doubts, as the Likert scale should perhaps be 1 to 7 rather than 1 to 5, as people seem to seldom rate themselves a 1 or 2 and so either the prompts are too simple or the range of responses is too limited. Everyone seems to score 3 or above, 3 being the mean, and a score above 3 indicating the presence of overexcitabilities.

Discussion

My 21-year participation in the Dabrowski research group has been both rewarding and eye opening. While I institutionally, and as a rule, tend to distrust hierarchical theories just by virtue of being a poet, a protester, and a perceiver, I have seen the Dabrowski Theory of Positive Disintegration influence the thinking of many of my students and colleagues. They seem to take the theory to heart. The influence of the Dabrowski theory on our field has been rather mystical and spiritual, as evidenced by the almost rabid and ideological devotion of those who take it up and who use it as an explanation for the way gifted and talented children are. People discuss how parents are stopped in their tracks: "This describes me! This describes my child! So this is why I am the way I am!" This instant recognition by those who hear about the theory for the first time must be taken into account by researchers and thinkers. This recognition taps into a reservoir that researchers into the psychology of the gifted and talented have not tapped, in their assertions about the scientific nature of giftedness.

One long-time adherent to the theory, who used it in a therapeutic practice, came over to me at one of the conferences and asked me, "Do you still believe?" I was taken aback. "Believe in what?" I responded. F. Christopher Reynolds attributes this almost

religious fervor of belief and attraction to the story behind the theory, that of World War II. Dabrowski noticed the way people responded to the atrocities in Poland. Some were noble and altruistic, and others were base. How would any of us have responded to the drama of World War II, the deprivations, the violence? He says the story of the theory is like a myth (personal communication, May, 2007). I agree. Often, psychological theories are avidly taken up by acolytes and practitioners, as witness both Freud's and Jung's theories, which continue to generate cult-like devotion, and which have generated institutes of trainers and volumes of commentary.

In my thinking and research on the theory, I have looked for studies with over eighty participants in each group, but there are few published in the journal literature, with either the OEQ or the OEQ-II. Some studies may exist in conference presentations (for example, our vocational comparison). Almost all the studies in the journal literature have small numbers of participants and so the findings are probably tendencies, in a post-positivist sense, and certainly in a positivist sense. The presence of intellectual overexcitability in high IQ students has been shown to be there, but there seems to be a lack of evidence of the other two of the magic three, imaginational and emotional OE, which Dabrowski said are necessary in order to be able to ascend up the multidimensional ranks. The condemnation of sensual OE and psychomotor OE by Dabrowski may be an artifact of the age in which he wrote the theory (one film shows him disparaging people who chew gum on a bus, which could be a manifestation of psychomotor OE in those people). These are thought to be "lesser" OEs, about which I am sure that passionate athletes and chefs would be in disagreement. It was once (I hope, jokingly) discussed that Ackerman's 1993 finding that the high presence of psychomotor OE in Canadian teenagers had to do with Canada's love of hockey. Then came Tieso's (2007) study using the OEQ-II, which also showed more than the average amount of psychomotor OE in her small population.

The studies will continue and the theory will be modified as well as reified. Perhaps the story here illustrates that the theory is about emotion and belief, and that is not all bad. Some people think that a theory should not change as more people work on it. These are the purists who want it to stay the way Dabrowski proposed it. Mendaglio's (2008) edited book of writings by the originators of the theory in Canada and the U.S. will cast more light on the theory as those who have used it to guide their work on adult development think about it. So will the edited book on intensities (Daniels & Piechowski, 2009). Piechowski's (2006) book uses the answers to the OEQ (many of the questions are from an earlier version) in a qualitative manner. He has chapters on each of the OEs, and the book is filled with transcripts, quotations, and comments from youth who show their intensities in all five areas—imaginational, intellectual, and emotional, but also psychomotor, and sensual.

His heartfelt essay in Mendaglio's (2008) edited book is a poignant example of how a researcher spends his life working to elaborate a theory.

For me, I've had these 21 years, so far. And while another Jane had a madwoman in her attic, my attic contains boxes of Dabrowski data. I have diversified, moved on in terms of personality assessment, again utilizing other instruments with the talented teenagers in my goal to confirm or disconfirm the presence of the personality attribute in my theoretical framework, the Piirto Pyramid of Talent Development (e.g., a regression study using the NEO PI-R (Costa & McCrae, 1992) and the Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (Hewitt & Flett, 2004). We presented it at the European Council for High Ability Conference in Prague in 2008, at the National Association for Gifted Children meeting in 2009, and are working on a final version (Piirto, Montgomery, & Thurman, 2008, 2009). My personal friendships with the people I met through the Dabrowski subgroup continue. Piechowski has taught a psychology of the self course for years in our summer honors program for gifted and talented adolescents, and my graduate students have done ethnographic studies of his classes; Falk, Miller, and I went out to dinner and a movie often before they retired and moved away; Pyryt, Mendaglio, and I often shared a drink at conferences and I sorely miss my dear friend Michael Pyryt; Tolan and I are bonded by our love of literature and poetry (see her poem, "Nightmare," in this edition of *Advanced Development*). Silverman can take a bath in my claw foot any old time. I am grateful to all. My fondness continues.

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ⁱ Ohio identifies gifted students in four areas: (1) Superior cognitive, defined as 2 standard deviations above the mean minus the standard error of measurement on an approved cognitive ability or achievement test, (2) Specific academic ability, defined as 95 percentile or above on an approved achievement test, (3) Creative thinking, defined as 1 standard deviation above the mean minus the standard error of measurement on an intelligence test plus an approved creativity test or checklist, and (4) Visual and performing arts, defined by display or audition plus an approved arts checklist. The students who filled out the OEQ qualified in at least one of these areas.