

## Lavender Morning

I like the bare bones  
feel of winter,  
savor the sharp silhouettes  
against the sky,  
the bear claw branch  
grasping the moon  
for brief moments  
before her inexorable climb  
to the frozen, star-littered  
wastes of outer space.

I mourn the passing  
of winter's dawn,  
the gray woolen look  
of clouds before  
lavender's warming touch,  
and the hammered brass  
of late-day light,  
impermeable to frost.

Others love the spring,  
all the lushness bursting forth,  
a stew of plenty,  
but I know the soothing broth  
to be made from bare bones,  
simmered on a slow fire,  
while it slowly warms the hands,  
and slowly binds the heart.

Deirdre V. Lovecky

## Psychomotor Overexcitability in the Gifted:

### An Expanded Perspective

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**ABSTRACT:** In Kazimierz Dabrowski's theory of human emotional development five "overexcitabilities"—psychomotor, sensual, intellectual, imaginal, and emotional—accompany unusual developmental potential. As traditionally defined, psychomotor is less clearly connected to advanced development than intellectual, imaginal, and emotional. If the definition of psychomotor (currently identified primarily with the "motor" aspects of bodily movement and physical activity) were expanded to specifically include physical energy generated by intellectual or creative activity, a sense of "the mind driving the body," psychomotor overexcitability might be seen to be more common to the gifted than previously believed.

In Kazimierz Dabrowski's study of advanced moral and emotional development, he observed that "five types of 'increased psychic excitability' were predictive of developmental potential. He called these *overexcitabilities* (OEs). They are assumed to be part of a person's constitution and to be more or less independent of each other" (Nelson, 1989, p. 9). The term should not be interpreted as a negative; it merely suggests unusual intensity, an unusual, powerful response to stimuli. The five OEs Dabrowski described are *psychomotor, sensual, intellectual, imaginal, and emotional*.

Psychomotor OE is usually seen as high physical energy levels and a need for movement and activity. Sensual OE has been described as a craving for sensual pleasures and "a keen sensual aliveness" (Piechowski, 1986, p. 190). Intellectual OE includes a drive to question, solve puzzles and problems, develop theories, analyze, and synthesize. Imaginal OE includes the use of vivid imagery, visualization, invention, daydreaming, building fantasies, and creating worlds within the mind. Emotional OE involves unusual intensity of emotion, but also a strong desire for meaningful relationships; it may include depression, anxiety, and fear.

Dabrowski (1972) had observed these overexcitabilities in the creative individuals he studied; therefore, it was hypothesized that OEs would be prominent in gifted and creative adults and children (Piechowski, 1979). This suggested that assessing the OEs could be a way of identifying the gifted other than by the standard measures of IQ and achievement. The Overexcitability Questionnaire (OEQ)—an essay question instrument—was developed and refined (Lysy & Piechowski, 1983) as a way of measuring the strength of each of the five OEs. It has been used in various studies of the gifted (Gallagher, 1985; Piechowski & Cunningham, 1985; Piechowski, Silverman, & Falk, 1985).

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## **The Definition and Place of Psychomotor Overexcitability**

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The three OEs that Dabrowski believed to be most relevant to the potential for advanced development were intellectual, imaginal, and emotional (Dabrowski, with Piechowski, 1977). Though psychomotor and sensual OE are noticeable in gifted people and have even been found in abundance in certain creative artists (Piechowski, Silverman, & Falk, 1985), they have generally been treated, as Dabrowski himself treated them, as subordinate characteristics, less important to the dimensions of development than the others. Currently, the assumption that they are less important is based on the findings that these two are less consistently evident than the others in OEQ responses (Piechowski & Colangelo, 1984) or are evident in less intensity than the others in gifted individuals (Piechowski, Silverman, & Falk, 1985).

I came to Dabrowski's theory from working with gifted children and their parents rather than with adults, and that perspective may be the reason for my slightly different take on the reality, the dimensions, and the importance of psychomotor OE. It is my belief that the reason psychomotor OE has not discriminated as well between gifted and other populations as intellectual, imaginal, and emotional OE is less because the gifted are more normal in the psychomotor dimension, than because of the way psychomotor OE has been understood and assessed. The focus has been far more on the "motor" (or bodily) half of the term psychomotor than on the "psycho" (or mind) half.

As the OEQ has been developed and used with various populations, psychomotor OE has been defined in terms of energy related primarily to body movement. Definitions and descriptions of psychomotor OE have included: "movement, restlessness, drivenness, a capacity for being active and energetic" (Piechowski, Silverman, & Falk, 1985, p. 540); "surplus of energy," [as shown in] "rapid speech, marked enthusiasm, fast games and sports, pressure for action, delinquent behavior...compulsive talking and chattering, impulsive actions,...workaholism, nervous habits (tics, nailbiting)" (Piechowski, 1979, p. 31); "an organic excess of energy, or heightened excitability of the neuromuscular system...a love of movement for its own sake—rapid speech, pursuit of intense physical activity, impulsiveness, restlessness, pressure for action, or drivenness; the capacity for being active and energetic" (Piechowski & Colangelo, 1984, p. 81).

Defined in this way and rated from responses to the OEQ that stress primarily physical activity, whether sports or movement or active, risk-taking behavior, or in such distinctly physical appearances as rapid speech, tics, or restlessness, psychomotor OE seems to be present, but not a major differentiating factor in most of the populations that have thus far been studied. One exception is a new study which found psychomotor OE to be the principal differentiation between two populations of teenage Catholic school students, one liberally identified as "gifted" and one not (Ackerman, 1993).

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## **Sleep Patterns and Psychomotor Overexcitability**

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One of the major differences between a focus on children and a focus on adults with respect to psychomotor OE has to do with sleep. In an adult population sleep patterns or needs (other than problems severe enough to be assessed as sleep disorders) may not be specifically noticed and recorded. We tend to assume that adult sleep patterns are chosen by the individual based on physical need, life circumstances, and personal preference. However, sleep patterns in infants and young children are quite noticeable because there are definite expectations about how much sleep they need. Considerable family friction is likely to result when infants and young children resist sleeping as much or as often as parents expect. Dealing with gifted and highly gifted children from birth onward, parents can't help but notice energy levels as they affect a child's need, or lack of need, for sleep.

Many gifted (particularly highly gifted) children seem to need less sleep than other children of the same age (Gaunt, 1989; Silverman & Kearney, 1989). Indeed, some highly gifted children (even toddlers) seem to need less sleep than their parents. While this is not the case with every child, it is common enough to be among the recognized characteristics of highly gifted children. Many parents tell of problems getting enough sleep themselves when their children learn to get out of their cribs and insist on actively exploring their world from the pre-dawn hours till the end of "prime time," or what tends to be thought of among parents of normal toddlers as "Mommy and Daddy's time to be alone."

Because not all highly gifted children show this characteristic, it could be argued that those who do are the children who, when they get old enough to take the OEQ would show a high level of psychomotor OE, perhaps bringing up the statistical incidence for an entire cohort, but not proving a high level of psychomotor OE across the population. However, many parents of gifted children who do *not* exhibit this characteristic nevertheless observe in their children variable sleep patterns that are well outside norms. Since sleep patterns seem to be unusual in gifted children, it may be worth considering whether they may be related to psychomotor OE and whether the definition of psychomotor OE may be usefully expanded to include what these patterns suggest.

## Personal Observations on Sleep

In the "Open Letter" chapter of *Guiding the Gifted Child* (Webb, Meckstroth, & Tolan, 1982), I described life (up to age 10) with my son RJ and his friend Jason, two highly gifted boys. Neither boy showed the "needs less sleep than grownups" characteristic. Their standard bedtimes were usually relatively ordinary for their age.

However, Jason's mother and I fairly early in their school careers noticed what eventually became our way of determining whether or not what was going on for them in school was intellectually challenging. When the boys were actually *learning* in school, they were able and relatively willing to go to sleep at their regular bedtime. However, if they were bored in school, they stayed up very late, in spite of parental reminders that they would be tired the next day. As it turned out they seldom showed any ill effects from their late nights.

This pattern began to serve as a fairly accurate assessment of the appropriateness of their schooling. At first we assumed that genuinely using their minds wore them out. But whether they went to bed and to sleep at a "normal" hour or whether they stayed up late, they regularly used their nonschool time for projects and activities of their own, building or inventing, creating or experimenting, and sometimes just reading. So it wasn't that they were so tired out by school that they had to rest or "veg out" in front of the television once they got home. They stayed busy; the difference was that when challenged in school, they might stay busy till eight or nine, and when not challenged, they stayed busy till ten or eleven.

We wondered if the boys needed a certain amount of intellectual or creative stimulation in any given day. If they got some of it at school, they were ready for bed at a normal time; if they did not get it at school, they pursued it well beyond bedtime. It seemed almost as if they had a mental activity quota that was necessary per day, and their bodies (regardless of how many hours they had been awake) did not quit until their minds had "done enough."

When I spoke to parent groups, I began to ask whether other parents had observed this pattern. Some parents had already noticed it. Others recognized what I described. And a few, who did not immediately recognize the pattern, went home to observe carefully, later communicating with me that their children, too, varied their need for sleep according to how much intellectual stimulation they were getting in school. This was not invariably the case, but wherever we looked for the pattern, we found it in what seemed to be significant numbers.

With RJ and Jason the pattern was particularly noticeable in elementary school. By the time they were in middle school or the upper grades (Jason skipped from sixth grade to 10th grade), their lives had become more complicated and it was no longer possible to distinguish a clear pattern. What continued as they got older, however, was extreme variability in sleep needs. Sometimes they seemed to sleep quite a lot; other times they were able to function on what seemed almost no sleep at all. A good part of the time between the ages of 10 and 13 RJ's sleep patterns changed the most around the role-playing game, *Dungeons and Dragons*. He seemed able to play *Dungeons and Dragons* almost *instead* of sleeping.

RJ was 13 when I first encountered Dabrowski's theory. By that time I'd been interacting with both parents of the gifted and highly gifted children themselves for nearly seven years and immediately recognized all five OEs both in the children I'd had contact with and in the stories related by parents. Variations in the levels of individual OEs seemed to account for nearly all the variations I'd seen in the children. Reading about psychomotor OE, I immediately thought of the highly gifted children who needed very little sleep.

RJ's physical activity level seemed to fit with the material that indicated levels of psychomotor OE were less unusual in the gifted than levels of intellectual, emotional, and imaginal OE. Far from speaking rapidly (a common characteristic among gifted adults with high levels of psychomotor OE), RJ as a young child had spoken so slowly that other children and even teachers sometimes made fun of him. We attributed his slowness to his efforts both to mentally follow every possible avenue of argument or every nuance of an idea as he tried to communicate it, and also to choose exactly the right words. While Jason as an infant was constantly active and demanded a constant change of scenery, which could indicate high psychomotor OE, RJ had been quite content to sit for hours propped in his car bed contemplating his toys, mobiles, or aquarium—low psychomotor OE. Both boys played some sports, but neither seemed particularly athletic. The idea that psychomotor was not strongly relevant to giftedness seemed borne out; Jason seemed to have moderate levels of psychomotor OE and RJ less.

## The Question of Definition

However, the term "psychomotor" gave me reason to question the emphasis Dabrowski and researchers since had placed on physical activity in considering this overexcitability. I checked my *American Heritage Dictionary* and found that psychomotor was defined as "of or pertaining to muscular activity associated with mental processes" (1969, p. 1056). I wondered about the mental connection.

Remembering the variable sleep patterns, I began watching the boys' activities more closely again. In spite of the greater complexity of the boys' lives at this time (Jason was in high school and RJ in junior high, with lots of social complications), a pattern could be discerned. When they were deeply involved in a project of their own devising—a project with high interest levels demanding a considerable amount of intellectual or creative focus—they regularly went without sleep for extended periods. Afterwards, unlike during their earlier years, they tended to "crash." When they were doing merely routine tasks, including their regular homework assignments, even if their lives were full of activity, they were likely to be as needy of sleep as any other young teenagers.

Again, parents of other gifted children frequently corroborated my observations. Linda Silverman, with whom I had shared many conversations about sleep patterns of gifted children, raised the question of sleep needs at a meeting of Parents of Gifted Offspring, a Denver support group for parents of children above 160 IQ. It was clear that children in this IQ range needed less sleep than others their age and

some appeared to need less sleep than their parents. One mother in the group asked parents how many hours of sleep they needed and how much sleep their children needed. According to the parents, almost every child in this group of 12 families resisted going to sleep and was difficult to wake up in the morning, so that evenings and mornings were trying times. But most parents and children needed *similar* amounts of sleep, though on different schedules. And variable sleep patterns were common among the parents (L. Silverman, personal communication, November 23, 1991).

I had already published a story that related to this subject in an article in *G/C/T* (Tolan, 1985). It was the story of RJ's first encounter with the toy Capsela when he was eight. He played (or, more accurately, worked) with it from seven in the morning until midnight, eating his lunch on the floor as he worked and barely taking time out to eat dinner. This concentrated, focused period included *no* time out for rest and went four hours past his normal bedtime; yet his energy did not flag and he had to be forced to go to bed at midnight when the rest of the family did.

Once I'd begun looking for them, examples of this phenomenon turned up in the experiences of many, many families with gifted children. High energy levels that postponed sleep occurred when the task at hand was something the child wanted to do (usually one the child had chosen), enjoyed doing, and found mentally stimulating.

### Sleep and Energy Patterns in Gifted Adults

I began to look at sleep and physical energy issues in gifted adults and discovered a similar pattern. I turned first to my husband, a theater director, and myself, a writer of novels for children and young adults. My husband prefers to get eight to ten hours of sleep per night. But when he is directing a play, when his mental focus is fully engaged, he frequently spends nights when he would rather be asleep, blocking and reblocking scenes, interpreting and reinterpreting text. It is not that he intends to do this or even wants to do it. He simply cannot turn off his mind so that his body is able to go to sleep.

My prime writing hours are between 10:00 in the morning and 4:00 in the afternoon. And my usual need for sleep is 7 or 8 hours. Long ago I found that I should not write in the evening. Instead, after dinner I either watch television or read, preferably a novel or something that will not strongly engage my intellectual or creative capacities. If, because of a deadline, I find it necessary to write in the evening, I usually can't go to sleep anywhere near my regular time. Again, this isn't because I don't want to or don't feel the need to sleep, but because I *can't*. My mind won't turn itself off. And when my mind is engaged, it runs my body as if I were a marionette, without regard for what my body might want or need. Intellectual or creative mental activity works on me (and on my husband) very much like caffeine. I have learned to use meditation and relaxation techniques to turn this energy level down; as I get older, I can no longer as readily recuperate from such a "mental binge" as I used to.

RJ and Jason are both now 21. And both agree that this can be a problem for them too. They may want more sleep than their minds allow them. After looking at this phenomenon in these same individuals as adults, we can go back and perhaps reinterpret what we saw in them when they were little. They may actually have had some sort of "mental stimulation quota" (caused by their very high levels of intellectual OE). However, the effect of staying up late after a boring day in school was probably caused by the intensity of their interest in the activities they devised for themselves to make up for that lengthy period of boredom. Because they were young and naturally resilient, they could miss sleep without showing immediate consequences.

Also, of course, we were not in class with them; teachers might have seen them after one of their late nights nodding over their desks, as the less-than-exciting school activities failed to keep them energized. It's very possible that some gifted children allow themselves if not to sleep, perhaps to "drift" during the school day, saving their energies for the more interesting activities they choose to do at home.

Virtually all the gifted adults I have asked to look into their own lives for this pattern of mentally-induced physical energy report being familiar with it. Almost all of us can remember intellectually stimulating bull sessions from college or graduate school that went on all night and left us woozy the next day. Or classroom discussions that took a turn so interesting that we left class feeling more wide awake and energized than when we went in.

A group of theoreticians who have been meeting regularly to work on a particularly intriguing new theory report finding themselves getting far less sleep during these several day meetings than they really need. Their body rhythms differ, but all are affected. Some stay up until the wee hours, others waken at dawn or before, their minds already engaged in the task. After several days of nearly constant thinking, talking, and writing, all are physically exhausted, but still revving on an intellectual high. One member described it as feeling as if she were a nuclear reactor, generating energy whether she wanted to or not. All have come to plan on a period of exhaustion and inactivity for the first day or two when they return home from a meeting.

This, it seems to me, is common not just to *some* gifted individuals, but to most. Probably every person, gifted or not, can point to times when something has driven their bodies beyond their normal physical capacities—perhaps it was an especially exciting novel that they stayed up most of the night to finish or the high of a particularly enjoyable party or what kids might call a "big date." And there are the stories about sudden superhuman strength in people faced with an intensely emotional emergency. But for the gifted the trigger for an extension of the normal physical capacities tends to be intellectual/imaginational/emotional in nature. It is as if the mind, when focused on an engaging task, generates energy that drives the body. This phenomenon has little to do with wanting to run marathons, lift weights, or play tennis to use up an abundance of physical energy.

## Energy Derived from Work

As reported in Piechowski, Silverman, and Falk (1985), 80 percent of the 100 painters and poets in two studies [Patrick, 1935, 1937] said they did their creative work in a "warm, stirred-up emotional state" (p. 543). While this could be assessed as an aspect of emotional OE, the warmth and "stirring up" seem to indicate levels of physical energy as well. Piechowski and Cunningham (1985) report that for a group of artists in one study, psychomotor OE was expressed as "a fairly high level of energy available for work, and energy derived from work" [italics added] (p. 160). It is this sense of energy derived from work (work in which the individual takes intense interest) that may be considered psychomotor OE if we expand the definition to be sure that the first half of the term is taken into account along with the second half. In the ratings of the OEQ or in interviews when raters are looking for purely physical activity as expressed in a need for constant movement, or rapid speech, or impulsiveness, or restlessness, or athletics, this aspect of psychomotor OE might be missed.

Questions on the OEQ that are intended to elicit psychomotor responses are the following:

5. When do you feel the most energy and what do you do with it?
7. How do you act when you get excited?
10. What kind of physical activity (or inactivity) gives you the most satisfaction?
14. When do you feel the greatest urge to do something?

Of these questions, number 5 may get at the mental aspect of psychomotor OE, but the others seem less likely to elicit responses that would capture that sense of the body being driven by mind.

It is true that many gifted people have continuously high levels of physical energy that demands bodily activity—the "motor" half of psychomotor. The same is true of many people who would not be called gifted. But is it also true that many gifted people who don't exhibit continuously high levels of physical energy may nevertheless create higher than normal levels of physical energy when engaged in focused intellectual or imaginal mental activity? If a question relating to sleep were included in the OEQ (asking, perhaps, for the sorts of activities the individual remembers that have interfered with normal sleep needs or preferences), psychomotor OE might correlate far more highly with giftedness than it seems to now.

Michael Piechowski has suggested that some of what I perceive as psychomotor OE when an individual is "turned on" by a mental task is actually either intellectual OE or imaginal OE, depending on the particular task (M. Piechowski, personal communication, July 10, 1991). And it is true that since all the OEs suggest an energy beyond normal levels fueling the activity, there would be some overlap in assessment. However, because energy levels for intellectual and

imaginational tasks connect not only with the intensity of the individual's interest in the tasks but to the body's actual need for or ability to sleep, it seems to me that we are seeing the very combination of mind/body energy specifically defined by the term psychomotor.

It has also been suggested that what I mean by psychomotor OE would show up anyway, in marked degrees of enthusiasm, for instance, so that raters of the OEQ would find it. However, in a beginning training session for rating the OEQ at the Dabrowski workshop at Ashland University in 1991, it seemed to me that this quality of being physically driven by mental energy was not being adequately assessed either in the questions or in the way raters were advised to score the responses.

It's quite possible that this assessment issue doesn't matter much, since psychomotor *is* a factor in the OEQ and does show up in the current ratings. But I have a sense that when the focus of our attention is primarily on the "motor" aspect, we give psychomotor OE less of our attention than it deserves. Perhaps by looking specifically for this aspect of psychomotor OE, we would increase the value of the OEs as an aid to identifying and understanding gifted individuals. Certainly, it is something readily recognized by gifted individuals.

Galton (1874) said, "in a man of genius, the ideas come as by inspiration; in other words, his character is enthusiastic, his mental associations are rapid, numerous and firm, his imagination is vivid, and *he is driven rather than drives himself*" [italics added] (p. 233). If viewed from this expanded perspective, Galton's man (let us add woman) of genius, whether constantly in motion or highly athletic or not, would seem quite clearly to be a person with high levels of psychomotor overexcitability.

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# The Heroism of Sensitivity

## An Interview with Kazimierz Dabrowski

*(In 1979 Kazimierz Dabrowski, the well-known Polish psychiatrist and psychologist, was interviewed in Warsaw by Zbigniew Bierzanaski. Dabrowski, most noted for his Theory of Positive Disintegration which focuses on the emotional aspects of personality development, was truly a social reformer. In this interview he specifies the value structure he deemed necessary for personal and societal advancement. The interview was published in Notes of the Group of Political Didactic in 1980 and has been translated for this journal by Ewa Hyzy-Strzelecka.)*

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**ZB:** You have said that you are not only an intellectual but also a reformer...

**KD:** I think it is all very connected. I don't see any possibility of separating the scientific from the reformative in my scientific and societal interests in human personality. One cannot enclose oneself within the limits of pure science. I must put into practice what I have considered, what I believe in, what I am convinced of, and what I have tested in my own experience many times. I am a reformer whose base rests on exact scientific observation and on some science-based intuition.

**ZB:** As a reformer, you are fighting for a chance for the "oppressed." Who are the oppressed you have in mind?

**KD:** They are the ones who are not shrewd, who are rather delicate, who aren't able to fight for their own interests, who aren't pushy or demanding, but who are industrious, have deep feelings, are often wise though unsophisticated. I think about those who don't press their claims, who aren't vulgar or aggressive, and who often suffer.

I have in mind another group of people too: neurotics and psychoneurotics, those who aren't mentally ill but are gentle, emotionally quite sensitive, who are never brutal but are often inhibited, who take things deeply into their hearts, and who withdraw into themselves rather than retaliate. I consider these people to be humiliated and harmed because nobody takes care of them, or, if anyone does, it is only because these unfortunates are deemed overexcitable, eccentric, and without resources. Not fending for oneself isn't necessarily a sign of lack of intelligence or ability to function, but very often is a sign of sensitivity and gentleness, which leads to the inability to contend with anybody about anything.

The correlation between the highly talented and psychoneurosis and neurosis is very high. Almost 97 percent of the highly creative suffer from different kinds of overexcitabilities, neuroses, and psychoneuroses. So, neurotics and psychoneurotics are a mine of social treasure. If their emotionality, talents, interests, and sensitivity