

# La Vida Intensa: Photovoice Portrait of a Lesbian Living with Overexcitabilities

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***ABSTRACT: A photovoice technique is utilized with the subject "Marisa," an adult lesbian who scored above the norm on the OEQ-II in all five overexcitability categories: psychomotor, sensual, imaginal, emotional, and intellectual, but especially high in emotional and intellectual. Marisa provided pictorial examples of three overexcitabilities and two journal entries that fit the emotional category. An analysis of repetitive refrains was conducted to determine any themes that were revealed through Marisa's pictures and rich writings. Together, these writings and pictures paint a portrait of a gay woman experiencing a multi-faceted, highly emotion-filled la vida intensa, an intense life.***

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*Today we are faced with the preeminent fact that, if civilization is to survive, we must cultivate the science of human relationships ... the ability of all peoples, of all kinds, to live together, in the same world, at peace.*

—Franklin D. Roosevelt (1882-1945)

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## Theory of Positive Disintegration

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Although the theory of positive disintegration (TPD) was published in 1964 by Kazimierz Dabrowski, a Polish psychiatrist and psychologist, it was not introduced to gifted education until 1979 when Michael Piechowski made a strong case for overexcitabilities (OEs) being better indications of giftedness and creativity than most published checklists, IQ tests, and other methods of identification used at that time. Since then, the field of gifted education in North America and Australia has slowly accepted TPD as essential to our grasp of the psychological characteristics of giftedness, with OEs being the aspect of TPD having the most appeal (Silverman, 2008).

Dabrowski (1967) emphasized personality development as emotional development. He distinguished between unilevel and

multilevel growth process by explaining how the unilevel growth process is dominated by social influence and the multilevel process is driven by emerging autonomous factors. Dabrowski believed that emotions such as existential anxiety, existential depression, self-judgment, and inner conflict were vital for advanced psychological development. The virtues of inner conflict and the ennobling value of suffering, however, are only possible if the individual accepts the suffering as something to grow through (Piechowski, 2008). Dabrowski (1967) observed that not all people move towards an advanced level of development, but that innate ability and intelligence, combined with *overexcitability*, could predict potential for higher-level development.

### **Overexcitabilities**

Overexcitability does NOT mean that someone is “overly excitable,” but instead, indicates a heightened sensitivity and aliveness in certain areas (psychomotor, sensual, intellectual, imaginal, and emotional) (Piechowski, 2006). The term “overexcitability” is a translation of a Polish word whose literal meaning is “super-stimulability” (Gross, 1994) in the neurological sense (Silverman, 2008). Dabrowski named it overexcitability because such a person “is stimulated and affected to a greater degree, and prone to remaining in such a heightened state for extended periods of time” (Piechowski, 2006, p. 16). According to the theory of positive disintegration, overexcitabilities are inborn and indicate a heightened ability to respond to stimuli (Dabrowski, 1964; Silverman & Ellsworth, 1981; Lind, 2000). Overexcitabilities are expressed in increased sensitivity, awareness, and intensity. Dabrowski (1972, p. 7) stated that “one who manifests several forms of overexcitability, sees reality in a different, stronger and more multi-sided manner.”

Although not all gifted individuals have overexcitabilities, researchers have found all five overexcitabilities to be stronger among individuals with intellectual giftedness than among individuals of average intellectual ability (Ackerman, 1997; Gallagher, 1985; Miller, Silverman, & Falk, 1994; Piechowski & Colangelo, 1984; Piechowski & Cunningham, 1985; Silverman & Ellsworth, 1981).

The five forms or dimensions of overexcitability are:

1. **Psychomotor:** heightened excitability or *personal energy level* of the neuromuscular system. This includes the capacity for being active and energetic; love of movement for its own sake; surplus energy demonstrated by rapid speech, zealous enthusiasm, intense physical activity, drivenness, and a need for action (Dabrowski, 1977; Falk, Piechowski, & Lind, 1994; Piechowski, 1979, 1991, 2006; Piechowski & Cunningham, 1985).
2. **Sensual:** heightened experience, or *sensory aliveness* from sensual input emanating from sight, smell, touch, taste, and

- hearing (Dabrowski, 1977; Falk et al., 1994; Piechowski, 1979, 1991, 2006). This includes an increased and early appreciation of aesthetic pleasures, such as music, art, language, and a delight in tastes, smells, textures, sounds, and sights (Lind, 2000).
3. **Intellectual:** *intellectual aliveness* or heightened need to seek understanding/truth, to gain knowledge, and to analyze and synthesize (Dabrowski, 1977; Falk et al., 1994; Piechowski, 1979, 1991, 2006). This must be distinguished from intelligence as measured by IQ tests. People who are high in intellectual OE are intensely curious, are often avid readers, and are usually keen observers. They are able to concentrate intently, engage in prolonged intellectual effort, and can be tenacious in problem solving. This may include relishing elaborate planning and may have extremely detailed visual recall. Individuals high in intellectual OE often love theory, thinking about thinking, and moral thinking. They are independent thinkers, ask persistent probing questions, may be very analytical and strive to synthesize knowledge, love to develop new concepts, search for truth, and sometimes appear critical of and impatient with others who cannot sustain their intellectual pace. They could become so excited about an idea that they may interrupt others inappropriately (Lind, 2000).
  4. **Imaginational:** *highly excitable imagination* or heightened play of the imagination with rich association of images and impressions, frequent use of image and metaphor, facility for invention and fantasy, detailed visualization, and elaborate dreams (Piechowski, 2006). People high in imaginational OE have a low tolerance of boredom and may escape boredom by creating poetry, dramatizing, indulging in fairy or magic tales, or by living in a world of fantasy (Dabrowski, 1977; Falk et al., 1994; Piechowski, 1979, 1991). They may have difficulty completing tasks when an intriguing idea sends them off on an imaginative tangent, or may write stories or draw, instead of doing paperwork or participating in discussions (Lind, 2000). A less imaginative person can still imagine, but a person high in imaginational OE cannot help it (Bouchard, 2004).
  5. **Emotional:** *emotional aliveness* or heightened, intense feelings, extremes of complex emotions, identification with others' feelings and strong affective expression (Falk et al., 1994; Piechowski, 1991; 2006). Dabrowski perceived personality development as emotional development. The fundamental nature of emotional development is not only what is felt, but also how *completely* it is felt. People with high emotional OE are those who "live their lives with greater intensity of feeling and rich texture of experience,

and in whom the current of life is stronger than most” (Piechowski, 2006, p. 3). They have a remarkable capacity for deep relationships and show strong emotional attachments to people, places, and things. They are acutely aware of their own feelings, how they are growing and changing, and often practice self-judgment and carry on inner dialogs. They may be shy or timid, be ultra-enthusiastic, have strong affective recall of past experiences or concern with death fears, anxieties, or depression. Emotional OE people are often accused of “over-reacting” (Piechowski, 1979, 1991).

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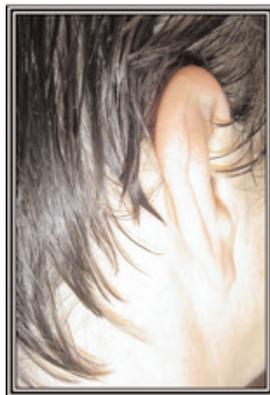
### Overexcitabilities from a Lesbian Perspective

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When pursuing my Ph.D, I took a qualitative analysis course in which I learned about Photovoice. Since my dissertation included gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and heterosexuals, I decided to try the Photovoice technique myself and provided the above descriptions of the five types of overexcitability to a lesbian who had scored high on all five areas of the Overexcitability Questionnaire II. For the purpose of this article, I will refer to her with the pseudonym Marisa. Marisa agreed to take or find pictures that illustrated these overexcitabilities: sensual, imaginational, and emotional. Following are those images and what each of them meant to her.

#### Sensual

Marisa scored high in sensual, 4.20 out of 5.00. She provided these examples of her heightened olfactory sense:



*I love to smell the inside of the ear ... especially in back of the ear. There is so much smell. I can smell the person's chemicals and I could never put into words what it is I smell. It sometimes seems like I smell the person's "being." Sometimes I can smell pheromones.*



*Nice ... as long as someone doesn't have body odor. There is something comforting laying with my face in the armpit ... the comfort of being held and the smell of baby powder-scented deodorant.*

### **Imaginational**

Marisa scored 3.50 out of 5.00 in the imaginational category. As you can see by the examples below, rather than being experienced as unique imaginational events, her imaginational experiences seem to be colored by her emotional overexcitability.



*I love watching people walking by when I'm sitting at the airport. I look at their faces and imagine what is going on for them. Are they happy? Are they hiding who they are? Are they running from something?*



*There is "Hoosier Buddy Bear" who holds "Ouchy Bear" and they both love each other dearly. They both have adopted "Woody Bear." They are a happy family. When I move them, they all get moved together. I feel emotional if I think about any one of them being separated from the others.*

*Then there is Big Bear Jr. and Little Bear Jr. They love each other passionately and are always together. They will always be together.*

### **Emotional**

Marisa scored even higher, 4.40 out of 5.00, in emotional OE, which seems to explain why so much of her writing appears to be affected by this strong characteristic, and why she provided so many more examples in the area that affects her the most:

*Sometimes I feel pain so deeply; I just bury my face in my hands and rock myself for comfort. It hurts so much....*



*I'll sit on a beach and look out at the sea and think about how big and expansive it is. Sometimes the emptiness inside of me feels big and expansive. Sometimes when I see the sea, I see my own emptiness inside. I want to cry.*



In addition to the images above, Marisa also provided this excerpt from her journal:

*Shaka was a 6-foot tall beautiful Yucca Cane plant that I had for eight years. I almost lost her a few times but she always came back to life. Fortunately, I was able to move her during 3 major geographical moves. Then the time came when I could not take her with me. No, I couldn't throw her away and leave her on the sidewalk with a "take me" sign. I searched, then I found a home for her; someone who wanted her. I spoke to her for many days before I had to take her to her new home. I told her I loved her, that I was not giving her up lightly nor would I ever forget her. She was my beautiful Shaka. Then the day came and with help I placed her lying down on the passenger's side of the car. I wept as I drove the 30-minute drive. I placed my right hand on her rough bark that felt so alive to me. I kept telling her how much I loved her and that she was going to a home where she would be cared for and that I would always love her and never forget her. As I struggled to move her onto the porch, one of her baby starts fell off. At first, I thought to toss it into the brush but then it dawned on me ... Shaka was giving me one of her babies so I could have a part of her and it was her way of telling me she understood. It's been a little over a year and as I write this, tears are running down my face. But then I look out on the porch and see little Shakita who once was a few inches tall and now stands a foot tall and who one day will stand as beautiful as her mother. That reminds me, I need to go out for my occasional story telling time with her when I tell her of her mother and how proud she would be if she were to see her now.*

She also provided a second journal entry:

*I was sitting in the middle of the floor like a heap of rags. The blows kept falling on me like hail falling from high above. The individual stood above me delivering blow after hurtful blow. I was crying and pleading for the beating to stop.*

*“Why are you hurting me?” I cried. “Please stop. Don’t hurt me anymore,” but the blows continue coming down on me. “What have I done that is so wrong?” I cried. “Please, please stop hitting me!” I looked up at the individual and even though I could not clearly see the face, I recognized who it was. It was me. I was beating myself up and I couldn’t understand why.*

*When had I become so angry with myself? Why and when had I started abusing myself? Why couldn’t I stop the beating?*

*I know what the beating was about this time. It was because of having missed presenting a small section of a class presentation, so the beating began. I wondered if that was why I became so nervous before a presentation. I knew I wasn’t the greatest presenter and I would probably miss a word or have to restate something. Perhaps I was nervous because I knew that it would be followed by a beating. Internal domestic violence.*

*I had realized that I had missed the section two days after the presentation. As I was taking a shower, I couldn’t stop the bombardment of thoughts. The thoughts were flowing and I could not stop them. “You missed the section.” “How embarrassing!” “That’s why my team looked at each other in puzzlement.” “The compliments after the presentation were out of sympathy.” On and on they kept coming into my head. I closed my eyes and that’s when I saw the beating taking place. That’s when I started pleading, “Please stop hitting me!” Why can’t I love myself enough to wrap my arms around “me” instead of beating “me”?*

Marisa ended with the image most significant to her:



*There was no direction. Then I met her. The love of my life, my soul mate, my spiritual mate, my rock, my joy, my everything ... my partner.*

Marisa did not provide any examples for psychomotor OE as this was one of her lower scores, 3.90 out of 5.00. I was curious about why she did not provide examples for intellectual, even though this score was the same as her score in emotional, 4.40. Conversations with Marisa revealed that she does not think of herself as a highly intellectual person or even as a smart person, though she did describe her intense curiosity, how she voraciously read Socrates and Plato as a teenager, and had the ability to easily read other people's body language. Her job required strong analytical abilities. Marisa also described how she loved to work with other people to resolve their issues. It was interesting that the example she provided of the airport, though it was infused with emotionality, hinted at her tendency to observe people and read body language, which seem indicative of intellectual characteristics.

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### **Analysis of Repetitive Refrains**

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The descriptions orchestrate a chorus of relationships. Repeated in each of the stories are lines that depict a refrain of relationship. Sometimes the accompaniment is a melody that wails of the antithesis of relationship—aleness. This is best articulated with the bears as well as the picture and story of the sea. Without the relationship, she *is* alone. To be alone is to be empty. This is said directly when she compares her own emptiness to the vast emptiness of the sea, but it also is expressed in the final picture.

In a less direct fashion, she infers aleness in the crowded airport scene. There is a sense of separation in that she is watching from the outside. Yet she questions the inside of each individual, wondering whether they are happy, if they are hiding who they are, or if they are running from something. This could be the ultimate loneliness, the hiding of self from the outside world.

This refrain is reflected often in the gay community, as hiding one's true self from the heterosexually-dominated world could be a necessary, or perceived necessary protection from discrimination or harassment. To have heightened sensitivities, too, that most likely would not be understood by many is perhaps an additional reason to not want to reveal the true, ultra-sensitive, and therefore ultra-vulnerable self. Oddly enough, protecting the self in essence only serves to perpetuate the sense of being alone.

Another repetitive aspect of the *relationship* refrain is associated with emotional "comfort" and its connection to the physical: physical scents, burying her face in her hands, rocking her body for comfort,

physical proximity of the bears, and the antithesis of comfort—“internal domestic violence,” which in itself carries the melody of desire for a relationship with self that is loving and accepting. All of these images and the journal entry resonate with the heightened sensitivity and tremendous highs and lows of the particular overexcitabilities that this individual experiences. Specific aromas that most people cannot smell, such as identifiable individual body scents, pheromones, and the gentle scent of a certain person’s baby-powder-scented deodorant, bring a delightful comfort. Her imagination constructs scenarios about the lives and thoughts of strangers for the delight of her own internal movie. Yet these heightened sensitivities can bring her down to the depths of despair and can cause her to subject herself to her own “internal domestic violence.” However, she attempts to fight her way out of that despair with her own internal dialogue with the voices of the caregiver and the one who needs that care.

She identifies with inanimate objects that, to her, take on their own personalities and become an integral part of her family. Her imagination is closely tied to emotions, as she specifically says, “I am emotional.” She will not separate the bears because they have a relationship and love each other dearly. She does not want them to be alone. She mourns the loss of her dear beautiful Shaka, a yucca plant who had been with her for years and was forced to adopt out. She takes tender care of her precious charge, Shaka’s offspring, and even tells little Shakita stories of her mother.

The relationship with her same sex partner brings her extreme fulfillment. She is not alone. She has a soul mate to travel this emotional world with her and to provide her with the comfort, pleasure, acceptance, and anchor she both wants and needs. With this one person she does not have to hide her true highly excitable self in all its rich complexity.

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## **The Importance of Relationships**

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Emotional OE is most often associated with developmental potential and is critical for the highest level of development to occur (Lysy & Piechowski, 1983; Ogburn-Colangelo, 1979, 1989). As shown in the writings of this one individual, her high emotional OE makes her extremely aware of her own feelings, which propels her to carry on inner dialogs and be self-judgmental (Lind, 2000; Piechowski, 1979, 1991). Her heightened sensitivity gives her a remarkable capacity for deep relationships, which to her are essential (Navan, 2008).

Hansen and Hall (1997) described how Dabrowski stressed a dual commitment to human relationships and to moral purpose, and that individuals cannot transcend the lower levels of actualization

without keen moral insight and sensitivity in order to notice and meet the needs of others. It is not possible to achieve the highest level without being committed to lives of altruism and authentic purpose, service to others, empathy for others, and harmonious relationships. The refrain or melody of this woman's life is that of intensity, intense relationships, sources of comfort, and all that comes with a life expressed in highly intense sensitivity and awareness. She observes intensely. She feels intensely. She imagines intensely. She has an intense analytical relationship with her internal self. Her reality is emotionally rich and multi-faceted. She passionately lives *la vida intensa!*

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