

Theory of Positive Disintegration as a Model of Personality Development For Exceptional Individuals

By Elizabeth Mika

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Overexcitability (OE)

This component of developmental potential deserves special consideration as it is frequently observed in gifted individuals, but perhaps equally frequently misunderstood.

According to Dabrowski, overexcitability is a higher than average capacity for experiencing inner and external stimuli and it is based on a higher than average responsiveness of the nervous system.

In overexcitability, "responses to a variety of stimuli may markedly exceed the value of an average response, they may last significantly longer (although this is not a necessary attribute of overexcitability), and they may occur with greater frequency." (Dabrowski, 1996, p.71).

Another characteristic of overexcitability is the ease with which psychological experiences based on it are "translated" into symptoms of autonomous nervous system, such as blushing, palpitations, sweating, headaches, stomach butterflies and cramps in response to anxiety, diarrhea, easy fatigue, increased skin sensitivity, etc.

The role of OE in development is a complex one. In Dabrowski's view, overexcitability is responsible for activating the developmental processes as it "(first,) provokes conflicts, disappointments, suffering in family life, in school, in professional life – in short, it leads to conflicts with the external environment.

Overexcitability also provokes inner conflicts as well as the means by which these conflicts can be overcome. Second, overexcitability precipitates psychoneurotic processes, and, third, conflicts and psychoneurotic processes become the dominant factor in accelerated development." (Dabrowski, 1970, p. 38)

Although his interests in nervousness in children date back to the very beginning of his clinical career, Dabrowski first used the term "wzmozona pobudliwosc psychiczna" (increased psychic excitability, or overexcitability) in 1938 to describe certain characteristics and behaviors suggesting nervousness, which he observed in many gifted and talented children.

He distinguished two forms of OE – global and narrow; and five types: psychomotor, sensual, imaginal, intellectual and emotional.

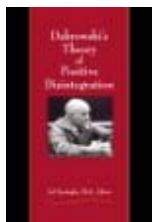
The last three types are crucial for the type of advanced personality development that Dabrowski postulated as characteristic for many gifted individuals, particularly for those whose achievement, while not necessarily rewarding them with fame and eminence, was to attain the highest level of emotional and moral growth.

Psychomotor overexcitability is a manifestation of a heightened energy level, and can be observed in restlessness, rapid and pressured speech, predilection for violent games and sports, pressure for action, or delinquent behavior.

In its 'pure' form, it is a manifestation of the excess of energy; but it may also result from the transfer of emotional tension to psychomotor forms of expression such as those mentioned above. Cases of tics and self-mutilation, for example, suggest psychomotor OE, which originates in emotional tension.

Dabrowski was keenly interested in self-mutilation as a phenomenon suggestive of higher than average sensitivity and DP. His Ph.D. dissertation on "Psychological basis of self-mutilation," first published in 1934 and printed in English three years later, showed the co-existence of self-mutilatory tendencies, creativity and strong developmental strivings in a select group of

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creative individuals (Dabrowski, 1937).

As Dabrowski observed, in people with psychomotor OE, the slightest stimulus evokes a strong reaction. Being accidentally touched in a crowd, being opposed in a discussion, cut off in traffic - any and all minimal frustrations can cause irritation or angry outbursts.

These individuals are internally and unconsciously motivated to seek higher than average stimulation, because when their internal tension becomes too low, they experience it as a state of anxiety and inner discomfort.

A person with psychomotor OE experiencing such a state of "nervous deprivation" will seek appropriate - and sometimes not so appropriate - stimulation to increase the inner tension and then to release it.

As Dabrowski writes,

"The real difficulties (for children with psychomotor overexcitability) start with the beginning of formal education. The greatest numbers of children who obtain bad grades for behavior come from this group. These are children who fidget in their chairs, disrupt their peers' work, play with pens and notebooks, have thousands of excuses to leave the classroom, and show severe fluctuations in attention. After school, and even during school, they start and lead fights and other physical escapades.

"Boys, who excel in independence and exhibit tendencies to rebellion at school, are most frequently individuals with psychomotor OE. Their difficulties are particularly strong in adolescence, but they are also abundant in other periods. During adolescence, psychomotor OE takes on the form of truancy and wandering. Among children hanging from the back of a tram, among those who sell newspapers (on the streets), tramps or those who travel without a ticket, we meet primarily these types. In schoolwork and adult employment these individuals are characterized by unevenness or breaks in the work patterns.

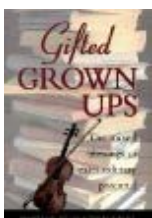
"They have periods of great intensity at work; in some, we find shorter or longer weakening of ability to work. These individuals are incapable of sustained effort, and are explosive at their workplace. Their work interests diverge in many different directions, and we often see frequent changes from one job or subject to another. In youth, we see tendencies to change schools, in young adults - jobs." (Dabrowski, 1964, p.76, trans. E. Mika)



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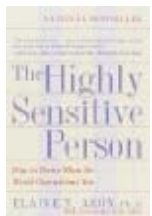
It is easy to see that Dabrowski's description of manifestations of psychomotor OE is remarkably similar to symptoms of the condition known today as ADHD. Indeed, Dabrowski's views on possible origins of psychomotor OE as well as management strategies for its manifestations are not at all different from contemporary views on etiology and treatment of ADHD (Dabrowski, 1964).

Unfortunately, this facet of Dabrowski's work is less known in the U.S. and this has resulted in a belief prevalent in the field of gifted education -- a belief unsupported by facts -- that gifted children with psychomotor OE tend to be "misdiagnosed" with ADHD.

Sensual overexcitability is a manifestation of a heightened sensitivity to sensory stimuli, particularly to sensory pleasure. In the narrow form of sensual overexcitability, the unusual intensity of reactions is limited to one sensual sphere (visual, auditory, tactile, or olfactory); the global form, on the other hand, encompasses the whole character structure and all senses equally.

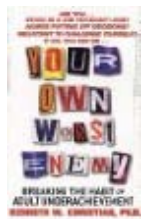
Children with global sensually overexcitability have an increased need to touch and be touched, hugged, and kissed; they frequently exhibit early signs of sexual interests and development; and like to flirt and behave seductively as they get older.

Most either like to eat and/or are picky eaters, are interested in food preparation, and like to



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smell their food (and often everything else).

As Dabrowski observed, they like to be the center of attention, approach others without hesitation and start conversations easily; and are prone to self-adoration, confabulations, and drama in their everyday life. They usually exhibit strong aesthetic interests and are drawn to artistic professions and pursuits.

On the negative side, people endowed with dominant sensual OE may lack the ability for reflection, planning and systematic effort – they tend to live “here and now,” dislike serious thought and intellectual analysis.

Their interpersonal relationships are often characterized by excessive sociability, an inability to tolerate being alone, a superficial attitude toward loss and death, little interest in lives of others, lack of responsibility, and a tendency to externalize problems and blame others.

“As with the psychomotor form, (sensual OE) also may, but need not be, a manifestation of a transfer of emotional tension to sensual forms of expression of which the most common examples are overeating and excessive sexual stimulation.” (Dabrowski, 1996, p.72)

Imaginational overexcitability is an imbalance in information processing that is skewed toward internal, image-based mode, with a relative exclusion of sensual, affective and psychomotor spheres. For individuals with a dominant imaginational OE, external stimuli matter usually as fodder for their imagination, rather than on their own merit.

Children with high imaginational overexcitability are less able than others to distinguish facts from fiction, are prone to illusions and daydreams, loose associations, lucid dreams, hypnotic trances, sometimes even hallucinations.

A child with a particularly strong and unbalanced imaginational OE may consider his fantasy world to be more real than his external reality. As Dabrowski notes, these children have a difficult time in schools, especially in areas that do not interest them – they may react with sadness, lack of appetite, or depression to school requirements; and are often considered odd, distractible and sickly by others.

Children with imaginational OE mature slowly and even in adulthood show symptoms of immaturity (so-called positive infantilism). The period of fantasy and magical thinking in their development is typically prolonged, and flirtation and sexual experimentation are very weak, or absent.

Their first sexual attachment is often a failure, since they are not very skilled in choosing appropriate partners. However, their love failures, even though intense, do not leave major wounds since they are compensated for in their imagination.

Frequently, persons with strong imaginational OE seek relationships with older and mature partners who can provide for their necessary daily living needs as well as offer protection and security.

Children (and adults) with this type of OE frequently show aesthetic interests in art, poetry and music. They like to spend time alone or in very small groups of select peers and relatives. They do not like games and sports, but love to read and think.

Sometimes they lose the distinction between their dreams and reality. Imaginational OE combined with emotional OE intensifies the tendency to prospection and retrospection, as well as maladjustment to external reality, often leading to positive disintegration.

Intellectual overexcitability is the rarest type of OE and one with the least clinical implications. In this type of OE, a person’s receiving and processing information as well as decision-making are localized in the cognitive sphere.

Children with the dominant intellectual OE ponder intellectual problems earlier and longer; show high perceptiveness; tend to develop good skills in logical analysis and are less prone to magical thinking; and early on become critical and independent thinkers.

This type of overexcitability is most frequently associated with exceptional intellectual and academic abilities in children (Dabrowski, 1964; Mika, 2002).

Its presence usually does not create any special developmental/clinical challenges and difficulties, apart from a possible developmental imbalance skewed toward a theoretical (vs. practical) approach to life, and possible disharmony between intellectual and other forms of maturity. Intellectual OE is often associated with certain socio-emotional immaturity (positive infantilism).

Global form of intellectual OE is frequently found in individuals of mixed introversion/extraversion type. When combined with emotional and imaginal OE, global intellectual overexcitability aids the development of a rich mental structure with multiple talents and great self-awareness.

A narrow form of intellectual OE is often encountered in schizoid and strongly introverted types, and it is characterized by one-sided development of specific abilities. As Dabrowski notes, such development usually leads to life difficulties that may end in negative disintegration, or stunted mental growth.

Emotional overexcitability is a function of experiencing emotional relationships. The relationships can manifest themselves as strong attachment to persons, living things, or places.

"From the developmental point of view, intensity of feelings and display of emotions alone are not developmentally significant unless the experiential aspect of relationship is present." (Dabrowski, 1996, p.72)

This distinction is of crucial importance, because only through learning based on reciprocal relationships, a child can develop the capacity for experiencing higher level emotions and multilevel dynamics such as guilt and shame, empathy, compassion, subject-object in oneself.

Children with high emotional OE show an early development of a strong affective life. These are the children who cry easily, are easily frightened and anxious, exhibit strong attachments to people, places and objects; as well as strong envy and anger.

Their intense emotional reactions are frequently signs of a higher than average need for security and safety. Other signs of emotional OE include excessive inhibition and excitation, strong affective memory, concern and preoccupations with death; "depressions, feelings of loneliness, need for security, concern for others, exclusive relationships, difficulties of adjustment in new environments (insomnia, irritability and lack of appetite), etc." (Dabrowski, 1996).

Teenagers with the dominant emotional OE are often perceived as infantile, naïve, lost, shy, non-competitive and immature. On the one hand, they are prone to experiencing shame and guilt; on the other, they tend to be overly open and trusting toward others – a combination, which, unfortunately, predisposes them to being taken advantage of by unscrupulous individuals.

People with dominant emotional OE develop relationships of friendship and love usually with very few or only one person. Because such close and exclusive relationships are the source of meaning in their lives, any losses and betrayals have a lasting, and sometimes devastating, effect on them.

Their sensitivity often increases as a result of difficult life experiences, and may lead to extreme self-analysis, and tendencies to meditation and isolation.

As Dabrowski observed, in some individuals with dominant emotional OE, chronic anxiety related to shyness may become a dominating personality trait that leads to excessive self-criticism, distrust and sensitivity to rejection.

Another danger for high emotional OE person is a tendency toward overidentification with others to the point of losing oneself in the emotional world of another, to the detriment of one's own well-being and growth. (Dabrowski, 1964)

However, when endowed with equally strong imaginational and intellectual OE, individuals with strong emotional OE can, and often do, sublimate and transform the pain and suffering that result from their excessive emotional sensitivity into creative and humanitarian efforts.

Emotional OE is expressed differently in extraverted and introverted individuals. In extraverts, emotional reactions are strong, fast, uninhibited and often explosive, although they quickly subside. Extraverts with emotional OE tire easily, but equally easily recover.

In introverts, on the other hand, emotional reactions are strong, but "delayed" -- they take longer (days, weeks, or months) to develop, and leave a permanent mark on the psyche.

It is important to note that the "delay" does not reflect a slowed-down reaction, but the need to reflect on a given situation and absorb its emotional content.

In an introvert endowed with emotional OE, emotional fatigue also occurs easily, though it builds up slowly and lasts longer. In introverts with strong emotional OE, we see positive maladjustment and a strong desire to transcend here and now.

They experience longings for a better reality and frequently escape into daydreaming, and show tendencies toward reflection and hierarchization of their goals and values, which protect them from depression in face of failure. Introverts with strong emotional OE usually display a strong affective memory and preoccupation with death and immortality.

Like the remaining overexcitabilities, emotional OE also manifests in two forms: global – as subtle and oversensitive consciousness and conscience; and narrow – in phobias, compulsions, excessive self-analysis and self-mutilation, which allow to focus free-floating anxiety in one fixed point and discharge it there.

The three overexcitabilities crucial for personality development are emotional, imaginational and intellectual. Sensual and psychomotor overexcitabilities play important, but supporting roles in development, according to Dabrowski.

Emotional, imaginational and intellectual OE, apart from sensitizing and increasing overall psychological receptivity to internal and external stimuli, help one develop attitudes of prospection and retrospection, bring unconscious contents to one's awareness and allow for their processing and integration, thus freeing great amounts of psychic energy, necessary for creativity.

The presence of multiple forms and types of OE increases richness of one's inner experiences, and by its dynamic, unstable, and, in cases of multiple strong OE, oppositional character, leads to frequent inner and external conflicts which often give rise to dynamisms of positive disintegration.

Such conflicts let us see different levels of our own experiences and intensify our growth through increasing our self-awareness, which becomes the basis of development through positive disintegration.

But overexcitability in itself is not always a positive developmental feature. Certain forms of emotional, sensual and psychomotor OE, for example, are associated with a host of psychological problems, which may have nothing to do with giftedness or high developmental potential.

And it does not take a clinician to notice that many manifestations of OE are recognized as part of symptomatology of various developmental disorders (Asperger's Syndrome, ADHD, sensory integration dysfunction).

In his 1964 "Socio-educational Child Psychiatry" textbook, Dabrowski presented guidelines for diagnostic differentiation between OE and psychological disorders.

While overexcitabilities dynamize inner development by propelling some individuals – those with high developmental potential -- to experience internal conflicts, which in turn give rise to efforts at self-education and self-transformation; in others, they may create tensions that are too difficult to absorb or resolve, and lead to serious psychological problems (Dabrowski, 1970).

Like with everything else in life, when it comes to OE, it is not as much what we have that matters most, but what we do with what we have.

As Dabrowski said,

“Oversensitivity (OE) without inner psychic transformation brings many unnecessary conflicts with others – magnifies the differences, and lessens and obscures the most important things.” (Dabrowski, 1972, pp.32-33)

Unraveling Terman’s fallacy

Even though the association between genius, or exceptional abilities and nervousness or mental instability, has been entrenched in the common wisdom and supported by a wealth of data (Taylor, 1983), the prevailing belief in the field of gifted education maintained that gifted children were well-adjusted paragons of mental health.

This tendency to attribute exceptional mental health to intellectually gifted individuals dates back to Lewis Terman and his longitudinal studies of 1,500 high IQ children (Shurkin, 1992).

One of explicit goals of Terman’s research was to disprove the notion that gifted children were more sensitive or nervous than average youngsters. He thus assessed a general category of “nervous disturbances” - which included such behaviors like restlessness, nail biting, teeth grinding, excitability, sensitivity, stuttering and sleep difficulties - by asking parents and teachers whether a child was “especially nervous.”

According to his findings, “nervousness” was reported less frequently in the gifted group than in the controls, while “timidity” and a tendency to worry were equally frequent in both groups. In general, gifted boys were only slightly more nervous than the non-gifted ones; while gifted girls were less nervous than their non-gifted counterparts.

Based on these findings, Terman concluded that gifted children were indeed in a very good psychological and physical health, certainly free from excessive nervousness.

But his data revealed a positive correlation between exceptional intellectual giftedness and different forms of mental and social maladjustment – a finding corroborated by others (Hollingworth, Gross, 2003).

Terman’s study has been subsequently criticized for its flaws, and a closer look at his research reveals inevitable biases and omissions that crept into it and influenced what the author saw, and - perhaps more importantly - what he did not see.

Although Terman denied higher than average nervousness of gifted children, he observed that one of their difficulties as students had to do with their excessive tendency to daydream and problems with adjusting to demands of structured school settings - both of which are symptoms of overexcitabilities, as defined by Dabrowski.

Dabrowski referenced Terman’s study in his work, pointing out that Terman’s analysis of gifted children’s mental health differed from his own in several respects (Dabrowski, 1970).

Curiously, Terman, who showed signs of intellectual precocity from an early childhood, was a highly nervous individual himself. The twelfth of fourteen children, young Lewis had to cope with the constant threat of tuberculosis, an illness that ran in his family and claimed the life of his older sister.

Her death affected 3-year-old Lewis so deeply that even in adulthood he suffered from insomnia aggravated by fears of a similar fate. As a grown-up, he developed a rigid and compulsive daily health regimen designed to protect him from recurring bouts of the illness.

An obsessive attention to details and control needs characterized both his work and personal life. Lonely, acutely aware of his uniqueness as a child and young man, Lewis exhibited strong ambition and intellectual strivings, augmented by his nervous temperament.

Describing his university seminars with Stanley Hall, Terman wrote this in his biography:

"I always went home dazed and intoxicated, took a hot bath to quiet my nerves, then lay awake for hours, rehearsing the drama and formulating the clever things I should have said and did not." (Shurkin, 1992, p. 96).

Even this brief confession shows an introverted young man with both emotional and intellectual overexcitabilities. Why Terman would not identify his own behaviors as expressive of nervousness and denied the existence of similar traits in his subjects is a matter of speculation, which goes beyond the subject of this presentation.

Although the questions about the co-existence of nervousness and exceptional abilities in both children and adults occasionally resurface, there is overwhelming evidence, both from clinical and research data, that supports the correlation between the two phenomena.

Many clinicians working with gifted children have independently observed and described these children's unusual sensitivity and intensity, which often set them apart from their less talented peers.

In several books, Dabrowski quoted his own research on gifted children. In one of the studies, conducted in Warsaw in 1962, he analyzed psychological characteristics of 80 gifted and talented children and youth (Dabrowski, 1967).

The study concluded that all gifted children and young people displayed symptoms of increased psychoneurotic excitability, or lighter or more serious psychoneurotic symptoms.

Dabrowski also discussed his research comprising 175 highly gifted and talented children and youth from Poland and Canada. According to the results, 85% of his subjects exhibited different forms of OE as well as neuroses and psychoneuroses.

Among over 200 eminent individuals from different fields whose biographies he studied, Dabrowski and his collaborators found that 97% of them showed different forms of OE, particularly emotional, imaginal and intellectual, neuroses and psychoneuroses, and also disturbances bordering on psychoses (Dabrowski, 1979).

He quoted findings of other clinicians who observed that most children with increased psychic excitability and with neurotic symptoms belonged to the category of gifted and talented. (Dabrowski, 1964).

Studies on overexcitabilities and giftedness have been continued in the U.S in the field of gifted education. For a brief overview of relevant research, see O'Connor (2002).

Additional support for Dabrowski's conclusions on the relationship between creativity and overexcitability (not called that) has come from research in clinical psychology and psychiatry. Several relevant studies are summed up in Jamison's book, "Touched with fire," which examines the relationship between manic-depressive illness and artistic temperament.

In her newest book, "Exuberance," Jamison examines lives of eminent individuals whose psychological make-up is shaped by hyperthymic temperament or manic-depressive predispositions (Jamison, 2005) – both characterized by behaviors typical of overexcitabilities.

This theme has been continued in J. Gartner's recently published book, "The Hypomanic Edge" (2005), where he examines lives of American successful entrepreneurs and historical figures

endowed with overexcitabilities (though, obviously, Gartner does not use this term).

Although Gartner's examples do not represent cases of advanced (or advancing) personality development as understood by Dabrowski, they nevertheless illustrate the correlation between certain forms of creativity and increased psychic excitability.

Inadvertently, too, Gartner's examples show negative influences that OE – not tempered and not transformed by empathy and reflection -- can have on personality development.

Some recent studies that confirm Dabrowski's insights into the relationship between traits strongly suggestive of increased psychic excitability and creativity include Strong and Ketter (2002), Carson et al. (2001), and Carson et al. (2003).

Strong and Ketter, for example, found that healthy (non-diagnosed) creative individuals are closer in their personality types to manic-depressives than to normal population as they exhibited higher than normal range of mood changes and personality characteristics related to neuroticism.

The authors attributed these findings to the wider emotional range in the creative individuals. The "wider emotional range" appears to be nothing else but Dabrowski's OE, described for the first time almost 70 years ago.

Apart from the research that continues in the field of gifted education, confirmations of Dabrowski's ideas on development, including his views on positive disintegration as a method of autopsychotherapy and personality development, have come from fields of psychiatry and neuropsychology (Schwartz & Begley, 2002).

Conclusions

Dabrowski considered his theory "work in progress" – "a series of inductive empirical generalizations" (Dabrowski, 1970, p. 130) – and expressed hope that, with time, most, if not all, of these generalizations would be either confirmed, modified or reformulated thanks to new research and theoretical insights.

Luckily, we do not have to wait until all tenets of Dabrowski's theory achieve a solid backing from research data (that is, if such an accomplishment were possible in the first place). The benefits of adopting a TPD-based perspective in looking at human development appear obvious.

The convergence of developmental psychopathology and psychology of exceptionality seen in TPD is a source of a new, and very promising, approach to treating human growth in its exceptional, as well as "normal" and "disordered" aspects.

One of Dabrowski's greatest contributions to our understanding of exceptionality and human development in general is the appreciation of the positive developmental value of various psychological difficulties, including many conditions commonly considered as pathological only.

For one, we can no longer remain satisfied with labeling traits such as overexcitability and developmental experience they engender as "pathological," since, as Dabrowski showed us, hidden behind the stigmatizing labels are individuals full of "creative restlessness (and the drive) to penetrate higher levels of reality" (Dabrowski, 1979, p.187).

Conversely, heeding Dabrowski's findings, we are able to become more aware of dangers of one-sided development associated with extreme developmental asynchrony, often encountered in gifted individuals.

The problems resulting from using intelligence in the service of most basic, primitive drives – a tendency associated with psychopathy – are especially evident in today's world.

TPD offers not only a useful theoretical framework for understanding individual differences and personality development, but also practical solutions for affecting positive change, particularly (though not only) in education and clinical practice.

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(From: Perspectives In Gifted Education: Complexities of Emotional Development, Spirituality and Hope. Vol.3, Fall 2005)

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