



# Applying the Dabrowski Theory to Build an Understanding of the Intensities and Sensitivity of Gifted Individuals

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**Received:** 📅 December 13, 2018

**Published:** 📅 December 18, 2018

## Abstract

This article explores the application of Dabrowski's theory of positive disintegration focusing on the five overexcitabilities (OEs) to build an understanding of the intensities and sensitivity of gifted individuals. The five OEs and selected moral dilemmas were introduced to a group of gifted students in a three-week residential program. The objective was to build their understanding of their OEs and to explore the question of whether moral courage can be developed. The Loevinger-Wessler Questionnaire was used as a pre-posttest instrument to gauge the student's growth toward autonomous behavior. Data indicated the students were able to demonstrate growth in their decision-making and autonomous behavior.

**Keywords:** Gifted dilemmas; Moral courage; Overexcitabilities

## Introduction

Gifted Individuals have a unique perception of their world and of themselves, and they can be intense and highly sensitive to moral issues with a keen sense of justice [1,2]. These moral issues affect them deeply and they often feel helpless in being able to make a difference. In *Making Great Kids Greater: Easing the Burden of Being Gifted* (2009) Sisk addressed the unique perception of gifted students and suggested ways that great kids can become greater. One way to provide a lens of understanding of the intense nature of gifted individuals is to apply the Theory of Positive Disintegration of Kazimierz Dabrowski [3]. Mendaglio [4] asserts that Dabrowski's theory is a personality theory for the 21st century and this article will explore its application to gifted students.

Dabrowski, a Polish psychologist called the intensities of individuals "over-excitabilities," and he described them as positive energy that enables one to live lives of immutable values. Dabrowski survived both World Wars and during World War II, he assisted Jews to escape from the Nazis. As a result, he was captured and imprisoned, tortured and denied permission to practice as a psychologist by both the Nazis and the communists. Dabrowski's

theory grew out of his experiences with injustice, death and suffering during this time of cruelty and inhumanity; yet, during that time he also witnessed incredible acts of courage and acts of sacrifice [5].

Upon his release from prison, Dabrowski began a study of eminent people, focusing on the values these individuals held and the goals they were seeking. He noticed that there was a strong relationship between cognition and emotion, particularly the pleasure these creative individuals derived from pursuing their goals? He also noted that they were intense, and he described these intensities as energy that was physical, sensual, creative, intellectual and emotional. Dabrowski said that their intensities resulted in creative work, as well as advanced emotional and ethical development. These over-excitabilities or OEs as they were later called, were a positive force in the lives of the participants in his study, and the OEs empowered and amplified their individual talents and gifts.

Michael Piechowski [6], a colleague of Dabrowski worked with him at the University of Alberta in Canada, and he said that without

some degree of intensity in the five OEs, talent would be a mere technical facility lacking the heart and fire of creativity. The OEs are defined with the following characteristics:

Imaginational OEs are spontaneous, they fantasize and frequently use images and metaphors in them

discussion and writing.

a. Psychomotor OEs are restless, curious and have lots of energy.

b. Intellectual OEs are keen users of higher levels of thinking, particularly analysis and synthesis, and they ask lots of questions.

c. Emotional OEs are sensitive and empathetic and have intense feelings.

d. Sensual OEs receive great pleasure in aesthetic and sensory experiences.

Dabrowski emphasized that the strength of three of the OEs (emotional, intellectual and imaginational) when they are combined with the special abilities of an individual represent developmental potential for self-actualization.

## Identifying the Oes

An Overexcitability Questionnaire was developed by [7] to help identify the OEs. The open-ended questionnaire allows the individual to respond in a natural free flow manner. The questionnaire was administered to 88 adolescents in the Texas Governor's School at Lamar University in 2018 and their responses help to illustrate the five OEs of Dabrowski. In response to the question "What kinds of things get your mind going?" the following imaginational OE was shared:

When I am working on my novel 🤗 which is my passion, the characters just share with me as I write. It is like my imagination is allowing me to be a part of what is happening. I never know what is going to happen next...it is an adventure fueled by my imagination. (Female, age 16) The question "When do you feel the most energy and what do you do with it?" elicited this Psychomotor OE response:

I feel the most energy when I play soccer. After a game, I am wired, and all of this energy is still there after a game, I can't sit still. I have been called hyper and even ADHD, which I am not, I assure you. I know I can be a pain to people who want me to be quiet and not move, like teachers. Soccer allows me to express my energy, but it is there all the time and I tap my pencil or just swing my foot. (Male, age 17) In response to the question "What has been your experience of the most intense pleasure?" the following emotional OE was shared: I volunteer on the weekend at a special camp for students with autism. When I see their faces come "alive" as they ride the horses, my whole body is full of happiness for them and the wonderful people who provide this camp. Before they are placed on the horse, the kids have no expression on their face, just sort of blank. But as the horses slowly move, the kids are filled with intense

happiness and so am I." (Female, age 17) In response to the question "How precisely can you visualize events, real or imaginary?" "This Sensual OE was shared: I read somewhere that a man said he could hear plants crying as they were dying, and I can feel my plants "smile" as I water them. I remember in my Montessori school I was given a cotton swab to brush on a plant that I was also given... the plants actually sighed as I touched them.

I also love the feeling of silk on my skin and my mother said I used to stroke my Dad's old tie as I went to sleep. I can visualize that old tie even now! I also listen to the sounds around me when I walk my dog, as if they were music, and when I close my eyes, I can see the picture in detail of where we've been and what I have seen. (Female, age 18) The question "Do you think about your thinking?" elicited this intellectual response: I think about my thinking. When I am doing my assignments, I think how much I know about the topic already, and then I try to add that information to my response. Sometimes in Math, the answer just jumps out for me, and then I have to rethink the process, just to check my answer. Sometimes I think so much about the lesson, that it slows me down. (Male, age 16) When individuals are introduced to the OEs, they build a better understanding of themselves, and when gifted students are introduced to the OEs, they and their teachers will gain a better understanding of what it means to be gifted. The OEs need to be presented as strengths, and the important role they play as they guide our lives, and what we value needs to be emphasized. Dabrowski said the OEs help us create a unique inner life [6].

## Sensitivity of Gifted Students

Gifted students have a keen sense of right and wrong and moral issues affect them deeply. Gifted students need moral courage to uphold the principles they believe in and Dabrowski said it is in the nature of many gifted students to attempt to be individuals who are true to themselves [3]. The question of whether or not moral courage can be encouraged and developed in gifted students was addressed in a study in 2018 at the Texas Governor's School (Sisk, 2018).

## Promoting Moral Courage in Gifted Students?

The Texas Governor's School is a three-week residential program for high ability, high achieving students ages 16-18. Each student completes an application indicating their leadership activities, A/B grades, high achievement scores on the PSAT or ACT, and teacher/counselor recommendations. The students of the Texas Governor's School (TGS) were introduced to moral dilemmas and encouraged to engage in self-observation and reflect on their values and on the values of others, as they explored the moral dilemmas. The dilemmas were introduced in the students' International Issues class by an instructor who engaged the students in a discussion of how a concept or belief can become your own. This involves a process in which one freely chooses a value-laden decision from other alternatives after thoughtful consideration of consequences.

## Loevinger Wessler Scale (1970)

The Loevinger-Wessler scale measures behaviors that range from the stage of Conformity, Transition to Conscientious, then to Conscientious, and finally to Autonomous behavior. This scale was administered to the students as a pre-test and as a post-test at the end of three weeks.

## Moral Dilemmas

One of the Marine Biology instructors suggested an introductory dilemma for the TGS students: Should the intelligence of an octopus be considered as a reason for an exemption from being hunted or eaten by humans? Should other animals be given animal rights? As you can imagine, the discussion was highly charged as the students began sharing what they knew about the octopus and animal rights and decided to gather more information for further discussion, and then making a decision concerning the dilemma. In the International Issues class the students were discussing poverty as an international issue and its negative affect on an individual's access to health care. Their teacher proposed a moral dilemma for the students to consider: In Mexico, a woman (Maria) was seriously ill from a degenerative nerve condition and near death. In Mexico City a Pharmacy developed a drug that has the potential of saving her. The drug was developed by a man for \$400 and the pharmacy is charging \$4,000. The husband (Ricardo) was able to raise \$2,000, and he asked the Pharmacy to consider his wife's serious condition, and to lower the price.

The Pharmacy denied his request. The man is thinking of breaking into the Pharmacy. Should he break into the Pharmacy to steal the drug? Is he morally right or wrong? The students researched other incidents of the alarming costs of drugs that are necessary for individuals with life threatening conditions. They placed a call to Merck and talked with one of their marketing representatives about the high cost of drugs and the health care gap between people from low income families and higher income families. Still another highly charged discussion was held in the International Issues class concerning reshaping our environment and society: Tweaking genes can help prevent a child being born with a genetic disorder, such as Down syndrome. Should we make everyone normal? Would this make population control possible? Is this process desirable? What are the benefits? Would this be acceptable to most people?

The instructors reported that the students became more and more reticent to make instant decisions concerning the dilemmas and sought out information and even developed questionnaires to ask the opinion of other university students concerning the dilemmas. Each of the students kept a journal and these were used in discussions with other students. Many of the students shared that they seldom thought of such moral dilemmas and expected others to make the decisions for them. They now felt empowered to be a decision maker.

## Results of the Moral Courage Study

The study indicated that moral courage can be promoted, and the application of the Dabrowski theory in the TGS program helped to build an understanding of the intensities and sensitivity of gifted students to their instructors and to the students. The TGS students on the Loevinger-Wessler Scale pre-test were at the Conformity level (60%) and Transition to Conscientious level (40%). On the post-tests 80% the students were at the Conscientious level, and 20% were at the Transition to Conscientious level. The growth in the ability of the students to examine issues and to consider alternatives before making decisions on issues was remarkable, and their journals reflected an understanding and appreciation for their OEs. In addition, the students indicated a willingness increase their service activities in their schools and communities. In Dabrowski's theory, living a life in service to humanity calls for an individual to reflect compassion in conscientious behavior. He said that living a life in service to humanity represents the core of one's being, and it is one of the highest levels of development that individuals can reach [4].

## Conclusion

The question of Can moral courage be developed in gifted students? was demonstrated and yielded a resounding yes. In the study, the Texas Governor's students were introduced to the overexcitabilities of Dabrowski and the TGS program focused on using the strengths of three of the OEs, the Intellectual, Emotional and Imaginational in their classes, particularly in the moral dilemma discussions. One important result of the study was the development of a TGS "school climate" in which the students were able to flourish academically, emotionally and socially. As they learned about their OEs, they developed a sense of personal awareness of their strengths that energized and generated an "aliveness" in the program [8]. Visiting teachers commented on being able to feel the positive "vibe" as they entered the classrooms. The instructors reported that the students demonstrated acute abilities of analysis and synthesis, asked deep probing questions as they engaged in discussions of the moral dilemmas, and a willingness to learn for its own sake. Darowski (1964) characterized these abilities as signs of intellectual overexcitability. Applying Dabrowski's OEs encouraged the instructors to promote an atmosphere where the students were valued and considered capable of autonomous behavior, and the students responded with trust and respect often well beyond their customary level of comfort.

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DOI: [10.32474/LOJMS.2018.02.000146](https://doi.org/10.32474/LOJMS.2018.02.000146)



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