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## Developmental Potential in Venezuelan and American Artists: A Cross-Cultural Validity Study

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**ABSTRACT:** *By comparing the overexcitability scores of 27 Venezuelan and 23 American artists, support was found for the hypothesis that creative individuals show a high degree of animistic, intuitive, and emotional thinking. Overexcitability refers to heightened mental functioning in Dabrowski's (1964) theory of emotional development. Along with other special talents and abilities, it represents the developmental potential for intensified personality growth. Scores on 4 of the 5 dimensions of overexcitability were not significantly different for American and Venezuelan artists. This evidence of similar profiles for artists in 2 different societies demonstrates cross-cultural validity for the concept of developmental potential.*

Barron (1963) observed that artists have the ability to give expression to their images of life, and, having done so, they invite "others to test the reality of their perceptions and, in a sense, to join them" (p. 235) in the recognition. Imagination seems to be a necessary prerequisite of artists' creative work. Intuitive thought processes and an emotional sensitivity also may be required. In his investigation of creativity in architects, MacKinnon (1962, 1965) found highly creative architects scored higher on intuition than did less creative architects. In the works of painters, sculptors, writers, musicians, and poets, Dabrowski and Piechowski (1977) saw a confluence of imaginal, intellectual, and emotional traits.

In Dabrowski's theory of emotional development, these traits are called *overexcitabilities* (OEs) and are part of the inherent makeup of the individual (Dabrowski, Kawczak, & Piechowski, 1970;

Dabrowski & Piechowski, 1977). Along with other special talents and abilities, OEs represent an individual's *developmental potential*, the potential for multilevel personality development. Multilevel development in Dabrowski's theory is intensified personal growth characterized by increased self-awareness, autonomy from primary drives, and authenticity, as well as empathy, compassion, and responsibility for others.

Dabrowski described five forms of OE in the subjects he observed: emotional, imaginal, intellectual, sensual, and psychomotor (see Piechowski, 1986, for a table of forms and expressions). *Emotional OE* is recognized as intense feelings: positive feelings, negative feelings, complex feelings, and identification with others' feelings. Those with emotional OE have the capacity for strong emotional ties and attachments to others. *Imaginal OE* is expressed through rich and unusual associations, a creative imagination, and a penchant for inventiveness. Use of metaphors, animistic and magical thinking, and dramatization are also expressions. *Intellectual OE* involves an insatiable quest for knowledge and is exemplified by endless curiosity. The capacity for sustained concentration and a preoccupation with complex ideas and issues are indicative.

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An earlier draft of this article was presented at the World Congress for Gifted and Talented Children, Toronto, Canada, August 1993.

The authors acknowledge the helpful comments of Michael Piechowski, the editor, and two anonymous reviewers.

Manuscript received August 1, 1995; revision received March 13, 1996; accepted May 3, 1996.

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*Sensual OE* is expressed through enhanced sensory gratification—for example, the pleasure of taste or touch or the excess of overeating. *Psychomotor OE* is characterized by high levels of physical activity and a surplus of energy. It is demonstrated through rapid movement that is sometimes compulsive, such as excessive talking, nail biting, or workaholism.

Based on the theory, Dabrowski et al. (1970) described a large set of hypotheses concerning the development of mental processes. These *inductive generalizations* were to be verified, they suggested, by examining various cases. One of these hypotheses states: “creative individuals in general, and those creative in arts and humanities in particular, show above average, enduring and even growing components of animistic, intuitive, and emotional thinking” (p. 141). The characteristics of imaginal, intellectual, and emotional OE show them to be good indicators of animistic, intuitive, and emotional thinking.

Several researchers have examined OE in artists. Piechowski and Cunningham (1985), for example, analyzed the OE profiles of a group of 13 artists consisting of novelists, poets, musicians, commercial artists, a dancer, and a weaver. These artists completed the Overexcitability Questionnaire (OEQ; Lysy & Piechowski, 1983), a 21-item, open-ended questionnaire designed to elicit expressions of the five dimensions of OE. On the average, these artists had higher scores on emotional and imaginal OEs than they did on the other dimensions. This finding provides support for two of the three characteristics of creative individuals suggested in Dabrowski’s hypothesis: emotional and animistic thinking.

The OEQ profiles of 13 of the artists then were compared with those of 31 intellectually gifted subjects from a study conducted by Silverman and Ellsworth (1981). The artists were significantly higher than the intellectually gifted group in imaginal and emotional OE. Although the artists had lower intellectual OE scores on average than did the gifted subjects, they were not significantly lower. There were no differences between the two groups on the psychomotor and sensual dimensions. These findings lend additional support to the hypothesis that creative individuals show above-average components of animistic, emotional, and intuitive thinking as defined by imaginal, emotional, and intellectual OE.

A further comparison (Piechowski, Silverman, & Falk, 1985) juxtaposed the OEQ profiles of 23 artists, 37 intellectually gifted subjects, and a group of 42

graduate students. The results showed that artists had higher emotional and imaginal scores than did the gifted group, and that they had higher emotional, imaginal, and intellectual OE scores than did the graduate students. Again, sensitive emotionality, creativity, and intuitive thinking were found in artists.

The findings across these studies, that artists exhibited high emotional, imaginal, and intellectual OEs provides evidence of the construct validity of the developmental potential concept, as measured by the OEs. To provide further validation, a cross-cultural study was designed to test developmental potential in another culture. By examining OE in a group of Venezuelan artists, this study was a further test of Dabrowski’s original hypothesis, which identified some of the characteristics of creative individuals (i.e., animistic, intuitive, and emotional thinking).

## Method

### Participants

Venezuelan artists were recruited using a “strategic cases” technique, in which subjects are recommended by members of the population as exemplars (Sarris, 1978). Using this approach, cases are selected that will reveal the most about the personality of the people of interest. Initial contacts were made through the School of Fine Arts at the Central University of Venezuela (Manzanero, 1985). Participants in this study represent persons who are professional or amateur artists. The amateur artists were identified and recognized by professionals as seriously engaged in an artistic task or in an avocation in the creative arts.

Of the 44 artists who agreed to participate, 27 completed and returned the questionnaires—a response rate of 61%. The 27 who responded included painters, sculptors, musicians, dancers, poets, writers, and actors. The sample was composed of 13 women and 14 men ranging in age from 21 to 73 years ( $M = 35$  years). Their educational backgrounds ranged from elementary school to graduate level. Many were enrolled in college on a part-time basis. Seventy-five percent were full-time artists.

For comparison, data on 23 American artists from Piechowski et al.’s (1985) study were obtained. They included writers, poets, musicians, fine artists, film

producers, and dancer-choreographers. There were 11 men and 12 women whose ages ranged from 18 to 59 years ( $M = 36$  years). Their educational backgrounds included one who had a general equivalency diploma and one with a medical degree. The others had taken some college courses; some had obtained or were working on advanced degrees. Very few were full-time artists.

### Measures

The OEQ consists of 21 items presented in an open-ended format. Items were designed to encourage highly personal responses that indicate one or more of the five OEs. The instrument is used for research purposes and has not been clinically normed. The OEQ was completed by both Venezuelan and American artists.

For this study the OEQ was translated into Spanish (Manzanero, 1985; see the Appendix for English and Spanish versions). The translation then was scrutinized for discrepancies in content and meaning, and any differences were corrected. For example, the decision was made to use the informal *tu* instead of the formal *usted* for the word you because the information requested by the OEQ is highly personal.

To further assure linguistic equivalence, two additional techniques were used. First, the English version and its Spanish translation were given to two bilingual professors of the foreign languages department at a western university. As a result of their expertise, several minor changes in the translation were made. Second, a procedure known as *back translation* was used. This technique involved translating the Spanish version of the questionnaire back into English. Next the original English and the final English translations were compared. Based on the back translation, additional changes in the Spanish version were made to establish comparability. The back translation and the comparison were carried out by three native Spanish-speaking persons with some college background.

Three bilingual students trained in using content analysis procedures coded the OEQ. The OEs were scored on a 4-point scale ranging from 0 (*no indication*) to 3 (*strong indication*) for each of the 21 items (Falk, Piechowski, & Lind, 1994). Each questionnaire was coded independently by two judges. Their ratings were compared, and any disagreements were discussed until a consensus was reached.

Scale reliability for the OEQ was reported to average .77 in a recent study of personality development (Miller, Silverman, & Falk, 1994), and test-retest reliability for the OEQ completed approximately 1 month apart was .65 (Ammirato, 1987).

Evidence of construct validity can be found in both clinical observations and research studies. For example, Silverman (1993) reported numerous examples of OE in high IQ clients in her clinical data. Investigation of seventh- and eighth-grade students found that imaginal OE distinguished highly creative from less creative students (Schiever, 1985); and in another study of sixth graders, high and low scorers were differentiated on the Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking by imaginal OE (Gallagher, 1985). In their comparison of artists and intellectually gifted adults, Piechowski et al. (1985) found that the group of artists had higher imaginal OE scores, whereas the gifted group had higher intellectual OE scores.

### Results

The pattern of means for the Venezuelan artists' OE scores shows that emotional (18.30), imaginal (14.81), and intellectual (13.00) OEs were substantially higher than were their sensual (6.00) and psychomotor (5.04) scores. The same pattern was found for the American artists—emotional (20.09), imaginal (17.04), and intellectual (10.87) scores were followed by sensual (8.09) and psychomotor (8.13) scores (see Figure 1).

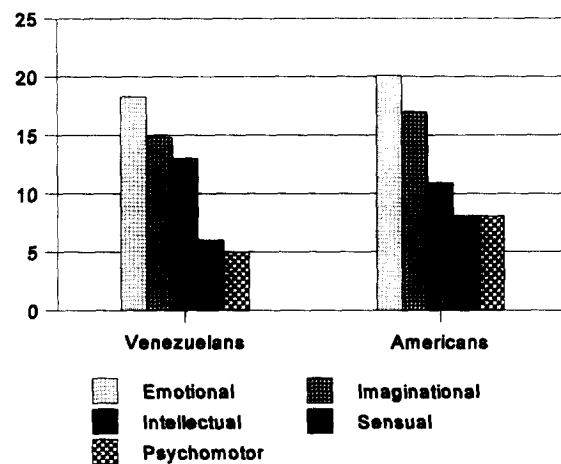


Figure 1. Pattern of overexcitability means.

**Table 1.** Test of Mean Differences for Venezuelan<sup>a</sup> and American<sup>b</sup> Artists' Overexcitability (OE) Scores

| Variable         | Group      | M     | SD    | Stepdown |       |
|------------------|------------|-------|-------|----------|-------|
|                  |            |       |       | F        | df    |
| Emotional OE     | Venezuelan | 18.30 | 8.82  | 0.36     | 1, 42 |
|                  | American   | 20.09 | 10.16 |          |       |
| Imaginational OE | Venezuelan | 14.81 | 3.33  | 1.57     | 1, 41 |
|                  | American   | 17.04 | 7.65  |          |       |
| Intellectual OE  | Venezuelan | 13.00 | 4.97  | 2.62     | 1, 40 |
|                  | American   | 10.87 | 5.73  |          |       |
| Sensual OE       | Venezuelan | 6.00  | 3.53  | 2.02     | 1, 39 |
|                  | American   | 8.09  | 4.63  |          |       |
| Psychomotor OE   | Venezuelan | 5.04  | 1.13  | 10.59*   | 1, 38 |
|                  | American   | 8.13  | 3.57  |          |       |

<sup>a</sup>n = 27. <sup>b</sup>n = 23.

\*p < .01.

A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was used to test if differences existed between mean scores on OE for Venezuelan and American artists and to test whether there were gender or age effects. A MANOVA on the five dimensions of OE revealed significant differences between the two groups of artists,  $F(5, 38) = 3.81, p < .01$ . Subsequent stepdown analysis of variance showed that the groups differed significantly only on one of the five dimensions (see Table 1). Psychomotor scores were significantly higher for American artists than for Venezuelan artists,  $F(1, 38) = 10.59, p < .01$ . No significant differences were found for emotional, imaginational, intellectual, or sensual OE scores.

As part of the analysis of group differences for Venezuelan and American artists, gender and age effects on OE scores were examined. Age was split on the mean and coded 1 (low) or 2 (high). The combined OE scores were not affected significantly by gender or age. That is, the scores of men and women were not significantly different on the OE scores; likewise, the scores of younger and older participants were not significantly different. No interactions among predictors were found.

### Discussion

The pattern of OEs that emerged—with high imaginational, intellectual, and emotional OEs—provides further support of the hypothesis that

animistic, intuitive, and emotional thinking are strong characteristics of artists. The vivid imagery, the association of discrepant features, the animistic and magical thinking (imaginational OE), intuitive and conceptual integration (intellectual OE), and the depth of feelings (emotional OE) were displayed by the artists in the study.

Developmental potential, as measured by OE scores, was found to be similar for Venezuelan and American artists. Four of five OEs were statistically equivalent; only psychomotor was different for the two groups. Although OE is theoretically innate, its expression undoubtedly is influenced by culture. Sports and fast-paced activities are emphasized in our North American culture, but a slower paced lifestyle is characteristic of Latin American countries. Latin Americans view life in more vitalistic terms, whereas North Americans tend to be mechanistic in their orientation. In Latin America, a sense of social time is prevalent: Time is seen as recurring and personal rather than as proceeding through material space (Boykin, 1986). These cultural variations, we believe, could account for the observed difference in psychomotor scores for Venezuelan and American artists.

The similarity of OE profiles for Venezuelan and American artists provides support for Dabrowski's position that the concepts of the theory of emotional development are not culturally specific. Dabrowski believed that his theory was valid across cultures because basic human traits may appear with different frequency but not so that they would be present in some and absent in other cultures (Dabrowski et al., 1970).

Similarly, the concepts of the theory are not specific with regard to gender or age. Male and female artists had equivalent OE scores, and no age differences were found for participants on the five dimensions.

Our findings suggest that OE, a significant part of one's developmental potential, represents an innate capacity for responding to stimuli for individuals across cultures. Although this study examined the developmental potential concept in only two cultures, it represents an important piece of supportive evidence for the cross-cultural validity of OE.

Because of the rigorous method by which the equivalency of the Spanish translation and the English original was established, we hope that it will be used with other groups of artists and other Spanish-speaking subjects to continue this important cross-cultural ex-

amination of the theoretical concepts in Dabrowski's theory.

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### Appendix: Items of the Overexcitability Questionnaire<sup>1</sup>

1. Do you ever feel high, ecstatic, or incredibly happy? Describe your feelings.
2. What has been your experience of the most intense pleasure?
3. What is your special kind of daydreams and fantasies?
4. What kinds of things get your mind going?
5. When do you feel the most energy and what do you do with it?
6. In what manner do you observe and analyze others?
7. How do you act when you get excited?
8. How precisely can you visualize events, real or imaginary?
9. What do you like to concentrate on the most?
10. What kind of physical activity (or inactivity) gives you the most satisfaction?
11. Is tasting something special to you? Describe in what way it is special.
12. Do you ever catch yourself seeing, hearing, or imagining things that aren't really there? Give examples.
13. Do you ever think about your own thinking? Describe.
14. When do you feel the greatest urge to do something?
15. Does it ever appear to you that the things around you may have a life of their own, and that plants, animals, and all things in nature have their own feelings? Give examples.
16. If you come across a difficult idea or concept, how does it become clear to you? Describe what goes on in your head in this case.
17. Are you poetically inclined? If so, give an example of what comes to mind when you are in a poetic mood.

<sup>1</sup>From "Personal Growth: An Empirical Study Using Jungian and Dabrowskian Measures," by K. Z. Lysy and M. M. Piechowski, 1983, *Genetic Psychology Monographs*, 108, p. 317. Reprinted with permission of the Helen Dwight Reid Educational Foundation. Published by Heldref Publications, 1319 18th St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036-1802. Copyright © 1983.

18. How often do you carry on arguments in your head? About what sorts of things are these arguments?
19. If you ask yourself, "Who am I?" what is the answer?
20. When you read a book, what attracts your attention the most?
21. Describe what you do when you are just fooling around.

**Items of the Overexcitability  
Questionnaire (Spanish Version)**

1. ¿Alguna vez, te has sentido eufórico, extasiado o increíblemente feliz? Si ha sido así, describe esos sentimientos.
2. ¿Cuál ha sido tu experiencia del instante de más intenso placer?
3. ¿Cuál es tu manera preferida de soñar despierto y/o fantasear?
4. ¿Qué clase de temas o cosas te hacen pensar?
5. ¿Cuando te sientes muy lleno de energía o vitalidad, Qué haces con esa energía?
6. ¿De que manera estudias y analizas a las otras personas?
7. ¿Como te comportas cuando estás contento o feliz?
8. ¿Con que precisión visualizas o imaginas algunos hechos ciertos o imaginarios?
9. ¿Acerca de que, te gusta concentrarte preferentemente?
10. ¿Qué tipo de actividad o inactividad, te proporciona más placer?
11. ¿Es el gustar o el saborear algo especial para ti? Por favor describe en que sentido es especial.
12. ¿Alguna vez has visto, oído o imaginado cosas que no están presentes? Por favor suministra algunos ejemplos.
13. ¿Te dedicas algunas veces a pensar sobre tu propio pensar?
14. ¿Cuando, o en que momento sientes los más grandes impulsos o deseos de hacer algo?
15. ¿Alguna vez has pensado, o se te ha ocurrido que las cosas a tu alrededor pueden tener una vida propia, y que las plantas, los animales y todas las otras cosas de la naturaleza tienen sus propios sentimientos? Suministra ejemplos.
16. ¿Si tienes una idea o concepto difícil de resolver. ¿Cómo lo solucionas? Por favor, describe lo que pasa por tu mente en esos casos.
17. ¿Tienes un don o inclinaciones poéticas? De ser así, suministra un ejemplo de lo que te ocurre cuando estás inspirado.
18. ¿Con que frecuencia y por cuanto tiempo mantienes un conflicto o una controversia en tu mente? ¿Cuál es la índole de esos conflictos o controversias?
19. ¿Si te preguntaras, Quién soy? ¿Cual sería la respuesta?
20. ¿Cuando lees una obra, Qué es lo que más llama tu atención o que te mantiene atento de un libro?
21. Describe lo que haces cuando vagabundeas en tus ratos de ociosidad.

