

Dąbrowski's Overexcitabilities and Related Research Findings.

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Over the past several years I have been struck by the fact that numerous researchers, apparently with no knowledge of the theory of positive disintegration, have discovered that characteristics, very similar to those described by Dąbrowski as overexcitabilities, are found in creative persons, the mentally ill, and mystics. The most recent example that has come to my attention is an article by Constance Holden (Psychology Today, April 1987, pp.9-10), in which she reviews a number of studies on the relationship between creativity and mental illness and describes three characteristics that creative persons and manic-depressives have in common. The first of these characteristics she calls "emotional reactivity" and it is described as follows:

QUOTE:"Both artists and manic-depressives tend to be highly sensitive to stimuli both from outside and from within. Andreason [i.e., Nancy C. Andreason, University of Iowa College of Medicine] calls this an 'extremely fine-tuned' nervous system, sensitive to a wide range of stimuli, including pain. She has speculated that this results from 'input dysfunction' or 'a defect in the cognitive mechanisms which filter stimuli.'"

Although the label given to this trait would suggest emotional overexcitability, the description also includes what Dąbrowski refers to as sensory overexcitability.

The third characteristic identified by Holden is named "absorption" and its description seems to be very close to that of imaginal overexcitability:

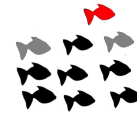
Quote: "Hypomania is associated with superior powers of concentration. Harvard neurologist G. Robert DeLong, who studies children with early signs of manic depression, says these children have significantly richer imaginations than most. They show an "unusual intensity of focus" when engaged in creative tasks, which results in impressive feats of memory and highly detailed drawings. They can become lost in fantasies for hours on end."

Holden's second characteristic, "disinhibition," may have implications for an expanded understanding of intellectual overexcitability. This overexcitability is defined by Piechowski (in Theory of Levels of Emotional Development, Vol. I, p.34) as manifesting "in persistence to ask probing questions, avidity for knowledge, analysis, theoretical thinking, reverence for logic, [and] preoccupation with theoretical problems." Disinhibition, according to Holden, is the ability to see connections and relationships not usually recognized by most people:

Quote: "Psychologist Ralph Tarter of the University of Pittsburgh says a 'fundamental breakdown in inhibitory mechanisms' is characteristic of most psychopathological conditions. This breakdown, which can be stimulated by alcohol or drugs, leads to farfetched connections, and - as is true of many artists - easier access to unconscious material. Manic thinking flows freely, and includes many loose and novel associations."

Perhaps the capacity described above is more a manifestation of imaginal than intellectual overexcitability, but it seems to me that it is not unrelated to intellectual overexcitability. In any case, the five overexcitabilities are ideal types rather than rigid categories and since different studies begin with different models (although these may be no more than tacit), the resulting categories cannot be expected to fit perfectly with Dąbrowski's overexcitabilities. Nevertheless I

find the overall similarities between categories to be rather striking.

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