



Overexcitabilities as important psychological attributes of creativity: A Dabrowskian perspective



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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to examine the contribution of overexcitabilities (OEs) to creativity from a Dabrowskian perspective, which posits that OEs are important psychological attributes of creativity. A total of 1055 (50.4% female) students in grades 7–11 in Hong Kong participated in the study. OEs and creative thinking were assessed using the Overexcitability Questionnaire–Two (OEQII) and the Test for Creative Thinking–Drawing Production (TCT–DP), respectively. While the OEQII was developed based on Dabrowski's thesis of overexcitability, the TCT–DP was developed according to the componential model of creativity that aims to capture various components of creativity by applying a gestalt approach. Several important findings are worthy of highlighting. First, the five forms of OE together explained 18.6% of the variance in creativity. Second, imaginational OE was ranked as the most significant predictor of creativity, followed by intellectual, emotional, sensual, and psychomotor OEs. Third, the OEQII showed significant discriminating power in the identification of highly creative individuals with a 71.8% accuracy rate. Theoretically, the findings lent empirical support to the Dabrowskian perspective regarding the predictive role of OEs to creativity. The findings also enrich Dabrowski's thesis relating to the OE–creativity relationship and promote understanding of the nature of creativity. Practically, the findings may facilitate the identification of creatively gifted individuals. They may also inform good practices in enhancing creativity development.

1. Introduction

Commonly conceptualized as consisting of originality and appropriateness (Sternberg & Lubart, 1999), creativity has been regarded as a crucial driving force for personal and societal progress and success (Runco, 2004). Creativity has become an important topic in psychological research over the years (e.g., Guilford, 1950; Kandler et al., 2016). Some researchers are especially interested in understanding the psychological attributes that may contribute to creativity, such as personality traits (e.g., Eysenck, 1995; McCrae, 1987), intrinsic motivation (e.g., Amabile, 1997), intellectual abilities (e.g., Karwowski et al., 2016), and thinking styles (e.g., Sternberg & Lubart, 1992). In accordance with this line of research, the aim of the present study was to investigate the psychological attributes to creativity from a Dabrowskian perspective, which posits that overexcitabilities (OEs) contribute to creativity (Dabrowski, 1972; Daniels & Piechowski, 2010).

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1.1. OEs as important psychological attributes to creativity

The concept of “overexcitability” was introduced by Dabrowski (1937) to refer to an individual’s ability to be stimulated by and respond to both external and internal stimuli (Piechowski, 1999). A stronger OE indicates a higher sensitivity to be stimulated and to produce a response in a more intense manner in the form of an extended, long-lasting, accelerated, and peculiar reaction (Dabrowski, 1967). OE has been defined as an “innate psychic trait”, “innate predispositions”, “temperamental disposition”, “inborn endowment”, or “original equipment” (Dabrowski, 1967, 1972; Daniels & Piechowski, 2009). Such definitions suggest that OE is understood as an inherent psychological attribute that indicates innate individual differences in terms of the sensitivity and intensity involved in responding to stimuli.

From a biological perspective, OE has been described as a property of the central nervous system. A stronger OE is related to a heightened physiological experience resulting from more sensitive neurons (Mendaglio & Tillier, 2006). From a cognitive perspective, OE resembles a type of mental functioning. A stronger OE is associated with enhanced information processing, which allows an individual to process a greater number of stimuli (Daniels & Piechowski, 2009). Possibly due to a heightened physiological experience and intensified information processing, it has been suggested that OE has the effect of making concrete stimuli more complex, enhancing emotional content, and amplifying experience (Dabrowski, 1975).

OE constitutes a component of developmental potential (Ackerman, 2009), which is the key concept of Dabrowski’s (1964) theory of positive disintegration. The theory specifically addresses the psychological development of the gifted, talented, and creative (Daniels & Piechowski, 2010, p.314). According to Dabrowski, OE is a fundamental psychological attribute that facilitates one’s development and creativity (Dabrowski, 1972; Daniels & Piechowski, 2010). In further elaborations of OE, researchers (e.g., Daniels & Piechowski, 2009) created the analogy that OE works as an engine that provides fuel to creativity by way of feeding, nourishing, enriching, empowering, and amplifying one’s creative talent. Without OE, it is believed that creative talent lacks power and richness (Daniels & Piechowski, 2010). Consistent with this theoretical proposition, Dabrowski and his colleagues (Dabrowski, Kawczak, & Piechowski, 1970) found that creative individuals showed greater abundances of OE characteristics than ordinary people in clinical studies with creative, gifted, and eminent individuals.

1.2. The five domains of OE and their contributing role to creativity

There are five forms of OE (Dabrowski, 1972): (1) psychomotor OE (i.e., high levels of energy or the expression of emotional tension through hyperactivity); (2) sensual OE (i.e., heightened responsiveness of the senses and enriched sensory experiences); (3) imaginal OE (i.e., vivid imaginations, rich associations of images and impressions); (4) intellectual OE (i.e., intense curiosity, marked need to understand the truth, pursuit of knowledge, and theoretical analyses); and (5) emotional OE (i.e., high intensity of feelings). The five OEs are considered independent of one another. Further, each OE has a wide range of expressions, resulting in significant individual differences in the sensitivity and intensity in response to stimuli (Piechowski, 1999).

Dabrowski (1972) believed that the potential for individual development was greatest when all forms of OE worked together. He also stated that each of the five OEs could contribute to creativity to a certain degree, even though some forms of OE play a more important role than the others. Specifically, Dabrowski suggested that imaginal, intellectual, and emotional OEs were the three major OEs that played the most vital role in the highest levels of creativity. He wrote, “If they [the three major OEs] appear together they give rich possibilities of development and creativity” (Dabrowski, 1972, p. 7). Following Dabrowski’s view, some researchers (e.g., Daniels & Piechowski, 2010; Piechowski, 1999) elaborated on the typical characteristics of the five forms of OE that may be related to positive creativity development. It has been suggested that a person with imaginal OE is passionate about imagination, fantasies, dreams, dramatizations, inventions, detailed visualizations, associative thinking, and magical thinking. Imaginal OE is also associated with a desire for novelty, variety, and the unusual. Intellectual OE is typically characterized with intensified and accelerated mental activity. Intellectual OE is also linked closely to curiosity, love of knowledge, love of problem solving, theoretical thinking, analytical thinking, independent thinking, avid reading, and the asking of probing questions. It is also correlated to the ability to concentrate and maintain intellectual effort. Emotional OE is characterized most often with intense emotions, intense empathy, and magnified affective expression.

With respect to the psychomotor and sensual OEs (which can be viewed as the two minor OEs), Dabrowski (1972) believed that they could contribute to creativity development when combined with the three major OEs. While sensual OE is primarily linked to heightened awareness of all five senses (i.e., sight, smell, taste, touch, and hearing), psychomotor OE is associated with impulsive behavior, compulsive organizing, love of movement, competitiveness, nervousness, and physical expressions of emotions. When psychomotor and sensual OEs are combined with the three major OEs, their positive developmental possibilities can be enriched and enhanced. Dabrowski further explained that imaginal OE could enrich psychomotor and sensual OEs with elements of fantasy, humor, and prospection, which are relevant to creativity. Moreover, imaginal OE can help to diffuse and dredge the primitive drive aspects of psychomotricity and sensuality by transferring the energy of the impulse to a different and broader territory that may contribute to creativity. Emotional OE can control and inhibit the primitive drive aspects of psychomotor and sensual OEs to facilitate creativity (Dabrowski, 1996, p. 74).

1.3. Existing OE–creativity studies

Although the Dabrowskian perspective suggests that OEs contribute to creativity, results of empirical research on the OE–creativity relationship are limited. Further, available OE–creativity studies focus solely on contrasting the OE profiles between

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