

**Positive Disintegration Podcast
Episode 16: Overexcitability and Openness to Experience**

**Chris Wells, Emma Nicholson, and guest Shelagh Gallagher
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Emma: Hello, happy listeners and welcome back to Positive Disintegration, a framework for becoming your authentic self. I'm your host Emma Nicholson, and with me is co-host Dr. Chris Wells. Hi, Chris.

Chris: Hi, Emma. How are you?

Emma: I'm good. How are you doing?

Chris: I'm well, thanks. Excited to be here.

Emma: Overexcited?

Chris: Overexcited. Yes.

Emma: Because that's what we're talking about today, isn't it? Overexcitabilities and openness to experience.

Chris: That's right. Our guest today, Shelagh Gallagher, is going to talk with us about openness to experience and overexcitability. I'm really excited to have Shelagh with us today because I met her almost four years ago at the Dąbrowski Congress in 2018. And her work made me feel less alone, gave me hope at a time when I was starting to feel kind of hopeless in my work with Dąbrowski's theory. So, I am really excited to have this conversation today, and there's so much to say about Shelagh and her work even beyond this openness to experience and overexcitability stuff. We're glad to have you here with us, Shelagh.

Emma: I'm hoping to get into this, too, because like you, Chris, I hope that this sort of speaks to the listeners a little, and maybe they'll see themselves a little bit in it and be able to resonate with that. So, without further ado, let's bring on our guest. For our listeners, today's guest is Shelagh Gallagher. Shelagh's career in gifted education spans 30 years. She's been a teacher, professor, researcher, and writer. Today, she conducts research, provides professional development, and contributes to state and national policy initiatives. She mentors a fourth-grade reading program and spend summers with gifted youth at Camp Yunasa. Shelagh is also the President-Elect of the NAGC. Welcome to the podcast, Shelagh.

Shelagh: Thank you so much, Emma, for that nice introduction, and Chris for those touching words. I really appreciate it, and I'm excited about tonight's conversation, too. I think we've got a little mutual admiration society going, so I'm looking forward to digging in with you tonight.

Chris: Well, thank you. But before we even go into that topic, we always ask guests when they come on to tell us how they first discovered Dąbrowski's theory. And I'm very curious for you how you did because I know that you did your master's thesis on overexcitability.

Shelagh: Back when there were dinosaurs, yes. In fact, I remember when I was introduced to Dąbrowski's theory because I was getting my master's degree with June Maker, and our cohort was all in a graduate seminar on some topic that I don't even remember what the topic was. But one day June came in with this photocopied article in her hand—had been printed off of a dot matrix printer, if you remember those. It was a draft of Silverman's chapter on Dąbrowski, and we read it as part of the seminar. And it was one of those moments when I had that sort of zing of recognition. I had a similar feeling when I read Krutetsky, who wrote about having a mathematical cast of mind, and how being a gifted mathematician was in part a function of seeing the world mathematically.

I had a similar response when I read William Perry's work on intellectual and ethical development. It was just sort of an immediate connection that helped things make more sense to me. I was so excited at that time that I approached June, along with a classmate of mine, Shirley Schiever, and we said we really want to go further into this as part of our master's degrees. And June very generously supported our traveling to the University of Denver to work directly with Linda Silverman and Frank Falk to learn how to score the open-ended overexcitability questionnaire, which was the only thing available at that time so that we could do our master's research. Well, my master's research, I think it was Shirley's PhD research on Dąbrowski. That was fascinating and it sort of turned my education master's degree into a split psychology degree. The body of my master's degree was this parallel between Dąbrowski and Kohlberg and Maslow.

Chris: Wow. And you know, it didn't occur to me—I know that paper, too—from your friend Shirley. I remember that from Roeper Review, so right, that totally makes sense now. Interesting.

Shelagh: We each were coders on each other's data.

Chris: And here we are all of these years later still talking about overexcitability. That's cool.

Shelagh: Well, and oddly enough, while people I think tend to associate me with Dąbrowski, and I've seen my name referenced in association with it, that's really the only research I did on Dąbrowski from then until I did the literature review for *Off the Charts*.

Chris: Right. And that Building Bridges chapter in *Off the Charts* is amazing and wonderful. So, that was actually I think the first place where I read about these connections between openness and overexcitability. And, of course, Michael mentioned it in the second edition of *Mellow Out*. So, all of those things were in my mind when I first came to all of this. Well, one of the things that has brought us together, aside from our mutual admiration society, is that there's been some controversy in the field of gifted education over the past several years. There were two papers that came out in 2016 that basically said that overexcitability and openness to experience were conceptually equivalent. And that instead of continuing to study Dąbrowski's theory, or apply it in the gifted, I should say, that it should be abandoned in favor of the five-factor model of personality. You wrote a paper that came out last year, and your paper is a beautiful comparison

of both overexcitability and openness to experience. You can see what they both are in some detail, and you also have a study with data as part of the paper. And so, if you don't mind, we would love it if you could introduce what openness to experience is for our listeners.

Shelagh: Let me just rewind a little bit and describe how I got into this because it was very much suicide door. I had been invited to write a chapter for *Off the Charts*, and at that time, I thought I would write an article about personal epistemology and giftedness. And that would be how students' interpretation and belief system about what learning is supposed to be like impacts the way they interpret the classroom, and the aims of education and what their teachers choose to do with them. I think that has important implications for what we do in gifted education. But as I started doing the background research on epistemology and measured intelligence, I found this tsunami of research on openness to experience and intelligence. And I thought, oh wow, this is important, and we need to bring this into our conversation because it's so pervasive in the field of psychology right now, at least in the field of personality psychology.

I started gathering it together and, of course, I started researching backwards into the origins, and I ran into Robert McCrae's original research on openness to experience. And when you read that description—it is so like Dąbrowski's definition of overexcitabilities, it's quite chilling. It's like, wow, how do you come up with two things so independent that reads so similarly. So, with that in mind, can I just say that openness to experience is one of the five factors in what's commonly known as the five-factor theory of intelligence or the big five? The idea behind the five-factor theory is that there are five continua that describes personality, and that each individual's combination of those five continua pretty much defines how their personality manifests. Those five areas are (1) openness to experience versus being closed to experience, (2) neuroticism versus emotional stability, (3) conscientiousness versus impulsiveness, (4) agreeableness versus uncooperativeness, and (5) extroversion versus essentially introversion.

So, of those five continua, its openness to experience that really seems to have the closest direct parallel to overexcitabilities. It also has the closest relationship to crystallized intelligence and, to a lesser extent, fluid intelligence. Crystallized intelligence is the stuff we've learned, essentially. And fluid intelligence is our capacity, our raw capacity for learning. When I read the two definitions, McCrae's definition and Dąbrowski definition, I thought, oh, well here it is, finally, at last we have something from the field of psychology that completely validates what Dąbrowski was saying about overexcitabilities. And that's very much the tenor of my chapter in *Off the Charts* showing the overlap that I saw between the two, and saying, what we have here are two ideas, which, while they're not exactly the same, they're reaching towards the same end, and they are close enough that we can use openness to experience to say it's time to turn around and look back at what we've done on overexcitabilities because there seems to be more there than many people thought met the eye.

That first paper was just a review of literature. That was good enough as far as it went. But then those two other articles that you were referencing, Chris, came out and their approach to it was so different, saying that we no longer needed Dąbrowski, that Dąbrowski was invalidated. And I thought, well that's really missing the point because while the two ideas, openness to experience, being curious about the world, seeking knowledge and experience for experience's sake, whether it's in the outside world of going places and doing things or the inner world of imagination and

introspection and ideas, whether you're talking about one or the other of those, it's not exactly the same as what Dąbrowski was talking about. I thought there really needed to be more time spent delineating where they were the same and where they were different.

Emma: I actually found your paper really interesting, and the table where you compare openness to experience and overexcitability really helped me make sense of both of the frameworks together. And for me it looked like—I might be wrong so feel free to correct me—that overexcitability was more trait-based and openness to experience was more behavior-based. So how that kind of manifests out in the world and to me it's just like, oh, okay, so you're just looking at similar things from two different perspectives and if you put those two things together, it gives you a better picture of things. I'm a bit miffed about the whole “one invalidates the other” because I think by comparing two things that are alike, it actually gives you more understanding of it. So, that was one thing I really appreciated in your paper that you actually compared them rather than saying, well, one knocks the other one off the perch.

Shelagh: Yeah, and I think you're exactly right. I love the way you described it; one being trait-based, and one being behavior-based. Because one of the key differences I think between the two are the paradigms from which they come in psychology. The Big Five is very much personality psychology, and it is how personality manifests and how it develops, and things like that. Dąbrowski, as a clinical psychiatrist and a developmental psychologist, was more interested in the implications of having those traits. When do they work well for you? When do they not work so well for you? How do we help people become better adjusted to the traits that they have and help them work towards their advantage?

And then also, how do these traits develop and manifest over time, or how do they contribute to development in other areas? I think one of the other key differences between the two theories that's particularly important is the treatment of values where in the Big Five and in openness to experience, values is considered a personality trait. Whereas Dąbrowski always considered values as a developmental trait, as something that would grow and change over time. And that's very much built into his theory of positive disintegration. Similar to Kohlberg, Maslow, Perry, and other people who dwell in the area of ethical or value-based development.

Chris: You just made me think that it's important to say that you did go on to write that paper about personal epistemology, and it's really good. There's so much that I've taken from your work in recent years and that's one of them. In that personal epistemology paper, you make the case—without making it explicitly—for a difference between unilevel and multilevel perception of reality, and in epistemology and one's thinking about the world and how they understand it. There's so much to Dąbrowski's theory, and I think that's what was so upsetting to those of us who study it when those papers came out in 2016. I absolutely don't mean for this to become a bashing session on them, but it's worth stating. I know that we have a lot of listeners who were upset by the idea that a paper can come out and displace something that's been so important to so many people for all of these years.

What's interesting to me now that I do clinical work with people is that I've never had anybody come to me and want to talk about openness to experience. People come to me with enthusiasm about discovering this whole framework for understanding themselves, and the struggles that

they've had, and this over-reactivity that they have to everything that is so hard to live with. And I don't think that openness to experience as a construct captures the experience of reality like overexcitability does. It's not there.

Shelagh: It's not designed to. And that's another one of the key differences, is that openness to experience, while it's called openness to experience, it's actually designed to describe a full continuum from being very closed to experience to being extremely open to experience. Dąbrowski focuses on the high end of that. So he's only looking at what you might call under other circumstances extremely open to experience. And in the paper, I make the parallel just as there's a field that studies the whole continuum of intelligence. We in gifted and talented education focus at this extreme end of intelligence and achievement and look exclusively at that. I think that's a very close parallel to what we're talking about here. The research on openness has just begun to touch upon the consequences of having extreme and you don't find much research at all on extreme openness as a phenomenon.

I do think that there's a lot of opportunity for crosswalk between the two theories that would help each, and in the name of not doing article bashing, I do think that those articles were a really helpful wake up call to the people who want Dąbrowski to thrive and want to see the research continue and want the research to be of quality and for it to be respected. There are some things that it pointed out that require some attention. For instance, in my article—in my research part of the article—I take a new look at how to score the Overexcitability Questionnaire because we do have to be able to define the difference between being open and being over something. And even Dąbrowski in his own writing says that's a hard line to draw between being excitable and being overexcitable.

So when I scored the Overexcitability Questionnaire-Two for my research study, instead of using average scores and averages because there's always a bottom tail that you have to account for in the scores, I used a cutoff. So there was an absolute minimum below which you could not be considered overexcitable. I got rid of that bottom tail and dealt only with people who were clearly above average on the Overexcitability Questionnaire-Two. That was one thing that I thought we really needed to address. And then there are also some areas of the Big Five and some areas of overexcitability that I think we get to look at in a different light as a result of having both bodies of research that we can look at together. So, while I was surprised and a little disconcerted at the approach that they took, I think that in the long run we can see a great benefit from being sort of prodded into new lines of research as a result of having those articles.

Chris: I completely agree with you, and I want to say that personally, I've become grateful for them honestly because they forced me to dive deep in a way that I don't think I would have otherwise. I came to this stuff at the time that those papers were coming out. I had just discovered overexcitability in 2014, but I didn't really start deeply even thinking about it until 2015. I was still pretty new to it, and these papers came out, and I thought, well, I need to figure this out for myself. So, it led me on this whole path. And if they hadn't come out, I don't think I would've had to dive in this deeply, and I wouldn't have come to some of the conclusions that I've come to by being forced to do that. I was just thinking this week about how when I came to all this, I just assumed that Michael was right, and that, for instance, there was a real difference between overexcitability and ADHD. That's another thing that I ended up digging into because of

these articles. And so it is kind of interesting to me how we can be grateful for things that even felt difficult at the time.

Shelagh: You brought up another area that I've sort of taken a different look at as a result of those articles and digging back into the research, digging back into the wonderful compilation of Dąbrowski translated works, Chris, that you've managed to compile. I'm thinking about a particular article by Dr. Limont who's done a lot of work in Poland. She does wonderful work on overexcitability, but she also did a translation of one of Dąbrowski's articles on creativity. In that article, he talks about different combinations and permutations of overexcitability leading to different areas of expressed ability. And that led me back to thinking about the "Big Three" that people talk about—that if you're gifted, you must be high in intellectual, emotional and imagination overexcitability. But that's not what Dąbrowski said. He said you could be talented in different areas with different combinations, but it was always a combination. It was never just one overexcitability by itself.

And so that led me to think that we needed to start looking in the research about how many overexcitabilities people had, because in some ways it's the combination of those overexcitabilities that makes them both very fruitful and very challenging. In my research study, not only did I use the cutoff score, I also took a look at the number of students who had 0, 1, 2 or 3 or more overexcitabilities.

Emma: The ways that you are looking at your research from different angles are very interesting because there's a bit in your article where you talk about Dąbrowski's original questionnaire that's been since lost, and it had a hundred questions on it. So, it was obviously very comprehensive, and I think it's exciting that rather than looking at how things are and saying, well, we've just got these questions or these tools folding, like exploring different ways of doing this research to try and figure out maybe how it was originally done, or to get new insights. Because clearly there's been stuff that's been lost, and we're never going to recover it. So I think it's good that you were sort of doing those comparisons. Because I found it really interesting in the stats of people who had combinations in particularly when you have all five.

Shelagh: Yeah, that's kind of alarming when you think about it, isn't it, to think, oh, that's going on inside of that milieu of five overexcitabilities.

Chris: Another thing that I found interesting, too, is—because I saw you present I think three times about this before the paper came out—one of the things that you just don't see in the gifted literature on overexcitability is the acknowledgement that not everybody who's gifted is overexcitable, and not everybody who has overexcitability is gifted, and that we really need to move away from this idea that they're synonymous because they're not necessarily synonymous. It's possible to even be profoundly gifted and only have intellectual overexcitability. And that's something that really became clear to me when I was looking at the data at the GDC and looking at IQ scores of extremely intelligent—profoundly gifted in IQ—children who otherwise don't have overexcitability other than that one intellectual.

Shelagh: So, the question in my mind now is proportions because in my study, which was a study of highly gifted middle school students attending a charter school, so you had to have two

or three standard deviations above on an IQ test and then some other criteria as well. How many of those kids had multiple overexcitabilities? How many had a couple, how many had none? And in this one sample, and again replication is everything in social science, but in one sample about a third of the kids had three or more overexcitabilities. That's a lot of kids. Then there was about another 20% who had two. There were nine kids in the sample who had no overexcitabilities and were not high in openness to experience at all.

So, now the question to me really is, what proportion of kids have those multiple overexcitabilities in combination with advanced intelligence? Which does seem to me to be very different cognitive territory than a child who would have one or two overexcitabilities. What's the life experience of those kids? What kinds of intervention do they need, if any, to help adjust to those? Dąbrowski is also very clear in his writing that part of what causes positive maladjustment, or some form of maladjustment, is the conflict between overexcitabilities who are both trying to get the upper hand psychically, and how having people helping people learn how to reconcile the presence of multiple excitabilities, overexcitabilities, which can be very challenging. The other thing that was really interesting to me was that when I did the analysis and I took a look at the kids who had 0, 1, 2 or 3 or more overexcitabilities and looked at their openness to experience scores to see, is it strictly a linear relationship? What does it look like? And what I found was that students with zero, one or two overexcitabilities had very similar levels of openness to experience that you would expect of other children of that age.

And they weren't very different from each other either. But when you looked at that group with three or more overexcitabilities, it was like a J curve. The openness to experience scores also shot up. Now interesting to us as educators and psychologists and people who are helping professionals who care about how these children grow and become thriving adults. Openness to experience, as I said earlier, is related to measured intelligence, particularly crystallized intelligence, but also fluid intelligence. It is not as directly related to school achievement. There is another factor in the five-factor model called conscientiousness, which tends to be more strongly related to school achievement.

Now of course we know that school achievement is a very different thing from intelligence because tied into school achievement are things like behavior and attendance and organization and other traits like that. So it was very curious that while this group of students with high levels of overexcitability and high levels of openness to experience did not have above average scores on conscientious.

Chris: That doesn't surprise me. Just speaking from my own experience of it.

Shelagh: There's a whole literature around conscientiousness and academic achievement. And it has some relationship with intelligence, just like openness has some relationship to academic achievement, but they really are reversed in their strength. And there's this whole conversation on the conscientiousness side saying, well, is grit just renamed conscientiousness? If I can just take this a step further in our current conversation in gifted education, about gifted education versus talent development, it really makes me think, what we're really addressing in the field right now are perhaps two really different kinds of students. There are these kids who are highly open to experience. This is connected to creativity and with creative productivity. The quirky,

iconoclast, and then the very studious high achievers who by virtue of sheer will and hard work manage to do really well in school. And how the field can embrace both of these.

I don't think we need to really choose one or the other. I think there's room for us to care about and support and nurture both groups, but how they're really different sets of students. And in fact, I have a quotation I'd like to read you from *Off the Charts* if I can. This actually was something that was said in an interview when there was a conversation, actually Stephanie Tolan and Patty Gatto-Walden had this conversation with a group of Yunasa students, and they were asking them about their experience of giftedness and what it was like. And it just strikes me as being very appropriate to this comparison. So this is a early high school student speaking when she says:

“I started ninth grade when I was 12, and there was another girl a couple of months older than me who was also starting ninth grade. The main difference between us was that she was working really, really hard to maintain good grades at the ninth-grade level at age 12, she was having a real struggle. She was constantly having to do homework, she had to put in a ton of effort, whereas I was sitting in my classes daydreaming because I still wasn't being challenged because the way traditional education is taught, it doesn't really hold my attention. And so I always thought there was an extreme difference between us seeing this girl's experience compared to mine when we were at the same age and in the same grade. I didn't really understand much about giftedness then, but even at that point I thought, this doesn't really seem like the same experience.”

To me, that's the difference between the highly conscientious child and the child who's open to experience or as we think perhaps the child who's got multiple overexcitabilities.

Chris: That was a wonderful example. Thank you so much. And it actually goes right along with the question that I have, which is, how can we use both overexcitability and openness to experience together to better understand the inner experience of giftedness? Or even, I would argue it's important to acknowledge that [the inner experience] exists, period. Because I think that it often gets lost in conversations about high achievers, that on the other side of that there is an [another kind of] experience of being extremely intelligent and gifted, especially if you also have overexcitability.

Shelagh: Well, I think we need to do more research to see if what I found bears out that there is this subset of highly gifted kids who have multiple overexcitabilities, that it's related to openness to experience, and that does suggest a different viewpoint on the world. When we think then about the consequences of that, or the implications of that, one of the things I think about is, and this is going to sound weird, but it goes back to how we measure these things. In order to get a high score, either on an overexcitability questionnaire or on an openness to experience questionnaire, you can't just be high in one aspect. Like on the Overexcitability Questionnaire. You can't get a high score by being just high on intellectual overexcitability. You can't get a high average score on the total questionnaire.

Similarly, on openness to experience, if you only have a high score in one part of openness, say openness to ideas, you can't get a high score. You have to get a high score across multiple facets.

So that suggests to me that this inner experience is multifaceted and that that's really important for us to consider when we think not only about the child's intellectual curiosity, but also when we think about their social world, when we think about how they are approaching their universe, as it were. I think that lends to a different way of considering these children and their needs as they grow.

Emma: To me, that makes perfect sense to look at the difference in experience to people that have particularly all five overexcitabilities. Because if you translate that to a real-life experience—so, say you're a person who's highly overexcitable and you have someone yelling at you, whether or not you're a child having a parent shout at you, or whether or not you're an adult having your partner yell at you in anger, if you are open to a lot of sensory input, it's going to feel really loud. You're going to be taking in every detail on their face. If you're overthinking it, your mind's going to be worrying with every insult that they throw at you. If you're highly emotional, obviously it's going to impact you very deeply, maybe to the point where you're having a physical reaction like you want to throw up. And if you are highly imaginal, you're probably thinking, this is the end. I'm doomed.

Worst case scenarios and your experience of that is going to be far more deeply impacting than someone that doesn't have all five of the overexcitabilities because life experiences are complex, layered things, they're not just, you're touching on intellect only, or you're touching on your imagination only. They impact you from all different directions.

Shelagh: And then we also get into this whole conversation about things that are impactful, talking about gifted students as a whole versus a subset of gifted students. And a lot of the research I found said that most gifted people have at least one overexcitability. But as Chris was suggesting, that certainly can happen, but that's going to be a lot easier to adjust to than having 2, 3, 4, and 5. And even if we only found that a very small subset of gifted students had four or five overexcitabilities, I still think that that's important for us to acknowledge and research and understand, again from the psychological perspective, so that we can help those people adjust, use those overexcitabilities to advantage where they can, how to regulate where necessary, so that they can be comfortable with what they've been given.

Chris: Yeah, that makes sense. It really does. And there's so much more to explore with this, too. I can't help but think about the connection with neuroticism and overexcitability. I mean, we really need to know more about how somebody with strong emotional overexcitability will end. I would say imaginal too—Dąbrowski talked a lot about the important combination of emotional and imagination overexcitability. I see in a lot of people that I know—in different ways—how hard it is to deal with neuroticism and it's something that you can change. I know that. I would say just personally, I used to be much more neurotic. I know—even though I don't have scores—that I used to be much higher on neuroticism than I am now because I've worked really hard in adulthood to not let my imagination run me, or my emotions.

So, these are things that you can change, but these are just areas that have been mostly unexplored when it comes to overexcitability because there's been—well, there was for a long time this drive or push to tie it with giftedness. There were so many studies done, as you know,

in overexcitability research where they looked at gifted versus non-gifted groups. And we need to really look at so much more than that.

Shelagh: There's so much more we still need to know. And I would say that, when I talk to people who have concerns about the conversation about overexcitabilities, one of the things that I hear is that parents have gifted students use overexcitabilities as a rationale for bad behavior. And I would say Dąbrowski never intended that. He definitely believed in regulating the behaviors and knowing when they were working to your advantage and when they were not. But I would agree with that, if that's what people are saying online in different places, that we should try to be squelching that because that's not appropriate. And until we understand more about overexcitabilities from this perspective, from other perspectives, again, I think one of the invitations that we've been given by virtue of the critical articles is to take a look at our practice.

What is our instrumentation like? We've got one questionnaire. Well, they've got about 40 questionnaires of openness to experience. They've got so many questionnaires, it makes it hard to interpret the research sometimes. Surely, we could take a look at another way of measuring overexcitability to see what new perspectives we could gain on it from that respect. And again, looking at cutoff scores, looking at counting and frequency counts as opposed to average scores. Looking at the positioning of the overexcitabilities—one of the things that's always been curious to me is that emotional overexcitability doesn't really show up in the literature the way one would think it would theoretically.

And for me, that comes not just from reading Dąbrowski's theory, but reading the biographies of scientists and historians and authors and philosophers who all talk about the passion for their work, and how it's the passion that drives them forward. So now I'm thinking, gosh, maybe emotional overexcitability is kind of a latent variable that gets expressed through the other overexcitabilities, but we've really not looked at what the possible relationship among them is. And I think that's another exciting opportunity for us moving forward. So I hope what this really does is launch a whole new really interesting and vital time of research in overexcitability. I hope we can continue to use the crosswalk between openness and overexcitabilities where there does seem to be definite overlap, definite differences, but areas of overlap that suggest that there is more for us to explore and to account for as we describe intellectual giftedness.

Chris: Well, one thing I want to say is that I have found in my clinical practice that there's still some utility for the open-ended Overexcitability Questionnaire. I have given it to a few of my clients so far. I put it in a Google Forms setup and it's fascinating to me. I don't give it to everybody because I have some clients who I feel like it's too daunting for them to answer. I have a 24-item version online, but some clients who I get are especially like Fiona Smith talked about in her episode is image-free with aphantasia. So, that doesn't come out well on imaginal overexcitability with the OEQ-II. But when I give this person the open-ended version and say, describe your overexcitabilities in this way, I get rich detail about the person, and it gives me something to talk with my clients about when they take it.

There's so much fodder there for discussion with clients when it comes to overexcitability. There's so much to work with, and I agree we need to go further. And Frank Falk and I have talked about how we wish that somebody would think about measuring overexcitability from a

neurological or a physiological perspective because I think that would be fascinating, personally. I have an Apple Watch and it's constantly—it feels like constantly—giving me the notification that my heart rate has gone over 120 beats per minute, and this will happen during times of conflict. I'll be messaging with somebody, and getting worked up about something, and my heart rate is that high, and this is how I've always been. I think that the physiological responses are another interesting way to explore overexcitability. And that's what Dąbrowski did, too. He used a neurological exam.

Shelagh: That whole idea goes back again to the idea of being able to use a crosswalk between the openness to experience literature and the overexcitability literature with the idea being that overexcitability represents some of the high end of openness to experience with a little bit of variation, which I can get to in a minute. But if we can say that overexcitability—it represents a high end of openness—in many respects than we have at our disposal this whole universe of research, which is deep and broad, and it goes into the neurology and into hereditary factors, it goes into cross-cultural research, it looks at gender, it looks at whether openness to experience can be impacted by training, which as it turns out is very difficult to do.

The few studies that look into changing somebody who is open to experience to make them more open, show minor, minor shifts as a result of traditional interventions. I haven't seen any research into an intervention that turned somebody who was closed into somebody who was open. This also is going to have a real impact because we are looking at another body of research that takes a look at the relationship between measured intelligence and measured creativity, and how openness to experience may in fact form a bridge between those two—between intelligence and creativity—that results in creative productivity. Which, of course, is a critical variable for us to be looking at when we think about innovation, when we think about invention, when we think about creative productivity, when we think about the kinds of 21st century outcomes that we say that we are aiming for in gifted education.

Chris: Well, you just reminded me, Shelagh, that one of the things that we can look forward to in the coming year or two at least is that Michael has been working on translating the book in Polish from 1935, which has so much information. It's called *Nerwowość Dzieci i Młodzieży*, which is *Nervousness of Children and Youth*. And in it, there's a chapter on the heredity of overexcitability where he talks about the fact that it's not only hereditary—Dąbrowski thought that you could have acquired overexcitability. And so there's really interesting new things that we'll be able to explore from this older perspective that gives us so much more insight into what he meant compared to what we've seen in his English work, which is just the tip of the iceberg compared to what you get from the Polish work.

And so when you were just talking about that, it just struck me that there's so much to Dąbrowski's conception of overexcitability that we haven't even explored yet because it hasn't been in English until now.

Shelagh: Yes. And I also think, again, that's the great gift that you're giving to people, Chris, in compiling these works, including some of the works that are very rare and hard to find now—it

was a great use to me to be able to go back into those original writings of Dąbrowski, and to reground myself in what his intention was around overexcitability.

I think that a lot of the misunderstanding about Dąbrowski that's out there right now is because people read *about* Dąbrowski, and they don't read Dąbrowski. And the idea that what we've got here is somebody who is a developmental psychologist—and we don't have many of those in the field of gifted education—and a clinical psychiatrist. And we have very few of those in gifted education. Thinking about the experience of giftedness from their paradigms and trying to create helpful growth-oriented ways of looking at the experience, and also from the developmental perspective, looking at the optimal trajectory and what that looks like. Not that everybody is going to reach the highest level of those trajectories. Nobody reaches the highest level of Maslow's hierarchy either, but it does describe what the trajectory looks like if one were to think about that path.

Emma: It seems like it's a very—well, we know it's a very rich and complex field to be researching in, and I don't envy either of you having to do those tasks because as new information comes to life, things shift. And even Shelagh, when you were talking about people in history, scientists who say they have this drive and passion, but maybe they've learned to regulate that and they're not showing it on the outside. So, you're trying to measure similar traits in people who even display them behaviorally different because maybe they have developed and learned to regulate those or to transform them. It's almost like you guys are trying to measure quicksand.

Shelagh: That's true. And again, what fascinates me right now about the research in Dąbrowski is that it's so much more robust in Europe than it is in the United States. And I would very much like to see us getting to a little more quicksand here in the US because I think again, there is legitimate criticism that some of the early research was either on small samples, or the methodology perhaps wasn't as sound as it could be. But the contemporary research on overexcitability is much stronger, with better sample sizes, more sophisticated analysis techniques, really more thoughtful and rigorous approaches that I think warrant more attention and more respect.

Chris: Well, thank you so much Shelagh. This was really incredible. And before we wrap up, I just want to say that it's exciting that you're President-Elect of NAGC. And I wonder, do you want to say something about what are your goals for your term as president?

Shelagh: Well, I've got a year before I'm there yet, so I don't want to get too far ahead of myself, but I would say that one of the things that Lauri Kirsch—who's the current president—and I talk about consistently is something I made reference to earlier that NAGC should serve as a broad umbrella, where all dimensions of giftedness are welcome into the conversation. It's where we have the discussion and present the data and have the conversation about what seems to be the most important evidence-based information that we can work with when we are dealing with the lives and nurturing and education of young gifted and talented children.

To me that's really important—that everybody understand that they're welcome at the table and into the conversation because we are so far from the end of understanding of this phenomenon

that we call giftedness or talent or both. I would like to see us all practicing a little more openness to experience as we continue to do our own research and listen to the research of others.

Chris: Well, that sounds great—it really does—and, honestly, while you were saying that, it made me think that another area of exploration that we haven't seen when it comes to overexcitability and the gifted is twice-exceptional children and adults. We need to know so much more about the 2e experience of overexcitability and there's nothing yet, which is kind of astonishing to me, although I believe part of it is that people have misunderstood the connections with overexcitability and types of neurodivergence. So, as we get some clarity around that, I think it'll get better.

Shelagh: I am very excited about the idea of gathering data on that and getting more clarity on the ideas that are emerging. So that would be something that's really, really exciting. In fact, I'll just circle back. One of the things that's popping up across all of these research studies is this relationship between psychomotor overexcitability and extroversion as it's measured in the five-factor model. And that seems to be such an anomaly, extroversion and psychomotor, that it makes me think about both of those a little differently. How is extroversion being measured by the five-factor model that this kind of nervous jitteriness that is psychomotor overexcitability is captured there somehow and psychomotor overexcitability, which doesn't always relate to openness, to experience that strongly. What is its relationship to the other overexcitabilities? We know they factor well psychometrically, but in the real world, how should we be thinking about psychomotor overexcitability in relation to the other four?

Chris: Good question. I'm glad that you brought that up because that was another interesting finding in your paper. There was so much there. I feel like I've probably said this in other episodes, but I hope that some graduate students are listening and they're like, oh, well, I've got my dissertation idea now. That would be great.

Shelagh: I hope so, too. Yes, I would be very excited by that. But I'd also like to put in a plug for the Dąbrowski Congress this summer because I think that will be a great opportunity for us to get this conversation going and really think about what the agenda for the future of research into Dąbrowski. Not just overexcitabilities, but the theory as a whole. I think this could be a really catalytic moment for us.

Chris: I agree. And if you come to the Congress in Denver in person, you can meet Shelagh, and I will be there.

Shelagh: That's right.

Chris: Well, thank you so much. This has been really incredible. I've been excited about this episode since we came up with the idea of the podcast practically. So, thank you so much for joining us.

Shelagh: Well, thank you. I'm thrilled to be here and really am just so impressed with everything that you've done to put this and other things together, Chris, you've sort of been an inspiration.

Chris: Oh my gosh. Well, thank you. I mean, I feel the same way about you. So again, with our mutual admiration society, but thank you. And it's thanks to Emma, too, that we have the podcast because where would we be without her? You're a great host, Emma and your technical expertise is invaluable, so thank you.

Emma: Well, I blush, and thanks Shelagh very much for coming onto the podcast because this has been great. I'm going to leave us all with a quote from your paper because I think this kind of sums up the whole idea of research and investigating Dąbrowski. So in your conclusion, Shelagh, you write,

“With respect to Dąbrowski in particular, it is worth remembering that Abraham Maslow said of the theory of positive disintegration, “I consider this to be one of the most important contributions to psychological and psychiatric theory in this whole decade. It digs very deep and comes up with extremely important conclusions.” Endorsement from one of psychology's most eminent scholars is not the same as empirical validation; however, it might be enough to justify more investigation into what warranted such a resounding recommendation.”

Chris: Thanks, Emma.

Emma: And thank you, Chris, for coming on the podcast as well. While we are thanking everybody it's a pleasure, as always.

Chris: As always, thank you.

Emma: And thank you, listeners. Where would we be without you? And if you're listening to us on Apple or Spotify, don't forget to hit those stars and give us a rating. As always, if you have any questions, feedback, or topics you would like us to talk about, please get in touch with us. You can email us at Positivedisintegration.pod@gmail.com or hit us up on Twitter or Instagram. And until next time, keep walking that path to your authentic self.