

# Overexcitabilities: The Drivers of Developmental Potential

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Words describing **overexcitability** in Dabrowski's work:

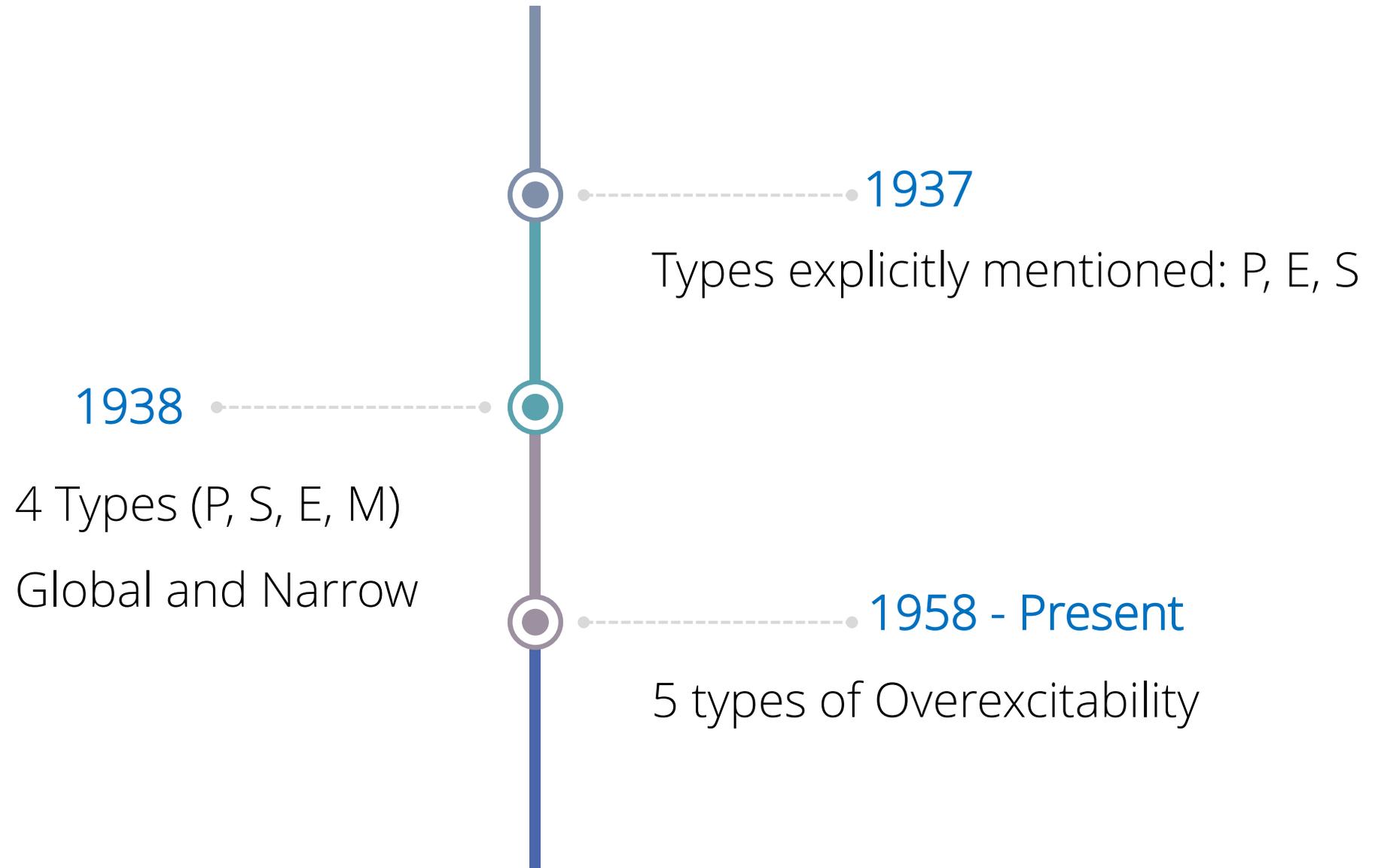
Pobudliwość – Excitability

Pobudliwości psychicznej – Psychic excitability

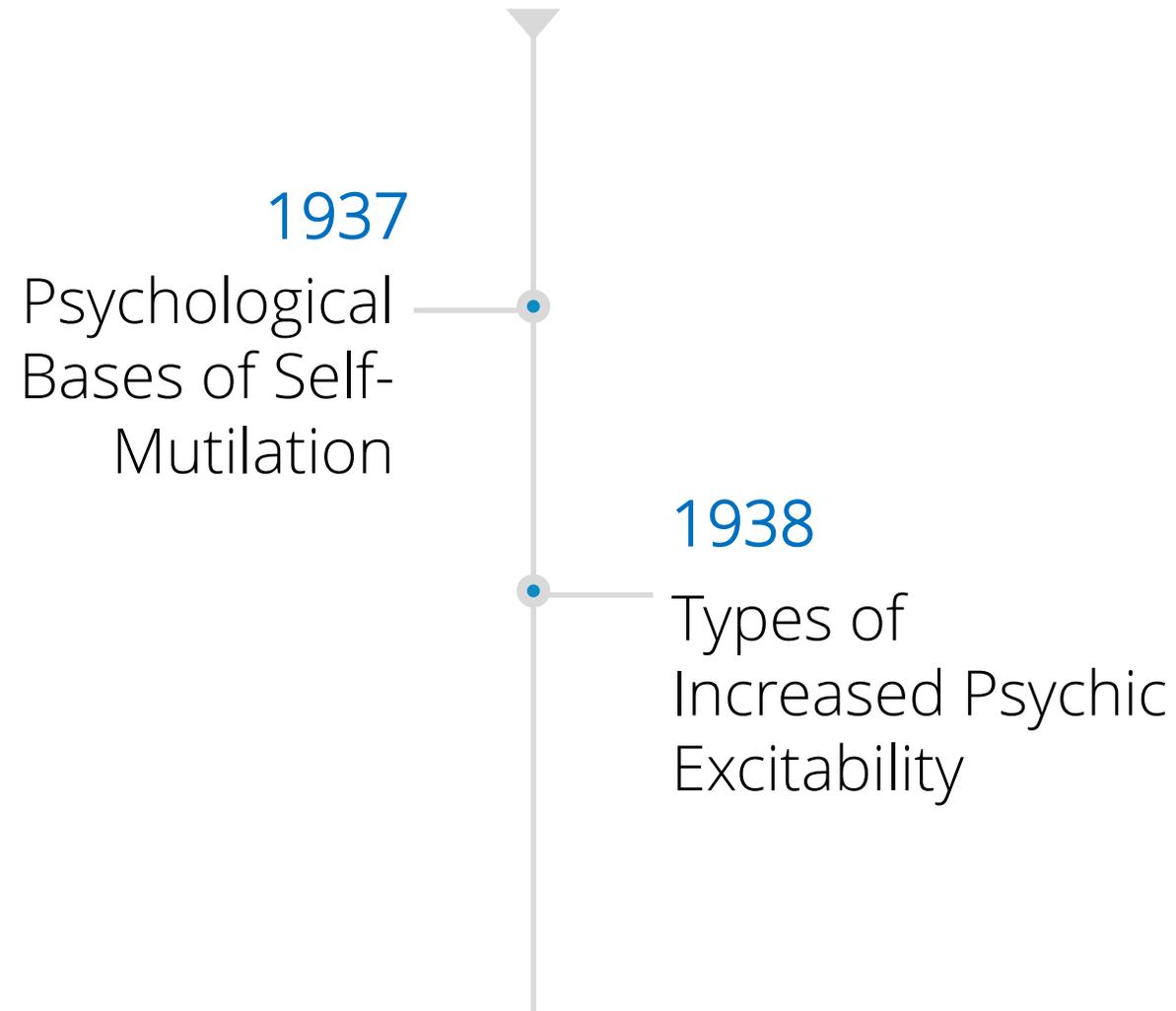
Nadpobudliwość – Hyperexcitability (1937, 1964, 1967, 1970, 1973), Superexcitability (1938/2018), Overexcitability (1937, 1964, 1967, 1970, 1972, 1973, 1977/1996).

Normal overexcitability, excessive excitability, increased excitability.

# Conceptual evolution of OE



# Overexcitabilities: A Timeline



1935, 1958

Nerwowość dzieci i młodzieży  
(Nervousness in Children and Youth)

1959

Spółeczno-Wychowawcza  
Psychiatria Dziecięca  
(Social-Educational Child  
Psychiatry)

1964

O Dezintegracji Pozytywnej  
(On Positive Disintegration)

Positive Disintegration

1967

Personality-Shaping through  
Positive Disintegration

# Developmental Potential

1970

Mental Growth through  
Positive Disintegration

1972

Psychoneurosis is Not an  
Illness

1972/1974/1996

Multilevelness of Emotional  
and Instinctive Functions, Vols.  
1 & 2

1977

Theory of Levels of Emotional  
Development, Vols. 1 & 2

# Evolution of Developmental Potential

1970 – *Mental Growth through Positive Disintegration* (Written with Kawczak & Piechowski)

- DP described as **differentiated potentials of the developmental instinct**:
  - “One can already observe in a child one and a half to two years old certain fairly well differentiated potentials of the developmental instinct. These can be expressed through various differentiated forms of psychic hyperexcitability such as sensual, psychomotor, emotional, imaginal or intellectual hyperexcitability.” (p. 31)
- **Also included** in these potentials are the **capacity for inner transformation** (or early nuclei of the inner psychic milieu) and **special talents, interests, and abilities**.

## DP in *Mental Growth through Positive Disintegration*

Dabrowski implies that the *dynamisms arise from OEs*:

**“It is from such potentials that arise the nuclei for the development of higher emotional attitudes, nuclei for transcending one-sided structures, for the development of authenticity, empathy, self-awareness and self-control.”**

(p. 32)



# Types of Developmental Potential

## Negative

- Isolated forms of S or P OEs, without the enriching aspects of E, M, or T OEs
- Complete absence of dynamisms.

## Limited

- The narrow forms of the OEs described in Dabrowski's earlier works (1938, 1959).
- Lack transforming elements (multilevel dynamisms).

## Strong

- OEs are more complex.
- Third Factor is present – dynamisms develop from OEs and form the inner psychic milieu.
- Multilevel disintegration is underway.

## Strong with Marked Developmental Dynamisms

- The process of development has moved into conscious, organized growth.
- Increased structural complexities in the OE descriptions – greater inhibition, transformation, organization, and systematization.

## 1972 – *Psychoneurosis is Not an Illness*

Dabrowski perceived E, M, T OEs as higher than S & P OEs:

“Some forms of overexcitability constitute a richer developmental potential than others. Emotional (affective), imaginal and intellectual overexcitability are the richer forms. If they appear together they give rich possibilities of development and creativity.”  
(p. 7)

He felt that transformative elements are lacking in P & S OEs.



# Developmental Potential in Children

Strong DP in a child:

- One six-year-old girl when asked by her mother whether she did not get tired by dancing so often answered: “Mother, I don’t get tired because I don’t dance, it’s only my feet who do the dancing.” In this expression we can see besides a marked refinement of thought, a nucleus of the development of the inner psychic milieu, initial forms of the dynamism “subject-object in oneself” and a developmentally significant dualistic attitude (a manifestation of different levels of experience).

(Dabrowski, 1972, pp. 8-9)

## 1974/1996 – *Multilevelness of Emotional and Instinctive Functions, Vol. 1*

- Levels of OE are presented, through Level IV for each.
- DP described in terms of the 3 Factors of Development on pp. 13-16.
- “The five forms of overexcitability undergo extensive differentiation in the course of development. One of its products are developmental dynamisms, i.e. the intrapsychic factors which shape and direct development.” (p. 16)

## Dynamisms arise from OE

“In general, we may suppose that in the sequence of development dynamisms are **the product of differentiation of forms of overexcitability**. Certainly, such dynamisms as dissatisfaction with oneself, inferiority toward oneself, disquietude with oneself, feelings of guilt, responsibility, empathy, are primarily derivatives of emotional overexcitability. They are its varied and more evolved forms.”

(Dąbrowski & Piechowski, 1977, p. 243)

## Publication Timeline

1974 – *Multilevelness of Emotional and Instinctive Functions, Vol. 1*

*Note:* This book is available from Bill Tillier's materials as the reprinted version from 1996: *Multilevelness Part 1*.

1972 – *Multilevelness of Emotional and Instinctive Functions, Vol. 2*.

- Contains seven cases.
- See Piechowski's (2008) description of the study in "Discovering Dabrowski's Theory."

## 1977 – Theory of Levels of Emotional Development, Vol. 1

- Less emphasis on the 3 Factors of Development.
- No mention of global vs. narrow OEs (all-inclusive vs. confined)

“The five forms of overexcitability undergo extensive differentiation in the course of development. **Three forms – imaginal, intellectual, and emotional – are essential for the formation of autonomous developmental processes. The autonomous processes are represented by multilevel dynamisms.** These are the processes in which the individual begins consciously to participate in and direct his own development. These processes depend on the presence, early in development, of the three essential forms of overexcitability.” (p. 60)

Increased complexity of OEs from unilevel to multilevel in *Vol. 1*:

## Intellectual OE

*Level I* – Not considered actual overexcitability. Skillful manipulation of data and information ("a brain like a computer").

*Level II* – Internal opposition, ambivalences and ambitendencies. One-sided development of one's abilities in a field. Acquiring knowledge without a deeper analysis and search for meaning.

*Level III* – Intensifies the activity of multilevel dynamisms.  
Enhances the development of awareness and self-awareness.  
Develops the need for finding the meaning of knowledge and of human experience. Conflict and cooperation with emotional OE.  
Development of intuitive intelligence.

*Level IV* – Intellectual interests are extensive and universal. Great deal of interest and objectivization of the hierarchy of values.  
Inclinations toward synthesis. Intellectual-emotional and intellectual-emotional-imaginational linkages are the basis of highly creative intelligence.

# Research on Overexcitabilities

- Dabrowski's 100-item questionnaire
  - Described in 1938.
  - 25 items for each type (Psychomotor, Sensual, Affective (Emot.), Imaginational.)
- Multilevelness Project
  - Coding for OEs was not a priority, but the OEs were observed in the responses in the autobiographies and Verbal Stimuli responses.

# Research on Overexcitabilities

- Overexcitability Questionnaire (OEQ)
  - Developed in 1973.
  - 46 open-ended questions formulated from the 443 expressions of OE collected from autobiographies and Verbal Stimuli (Dabrowski & Piechowski, 1996).
- OEQ-II
- Other instruments – OIP, OEQ-IIC
- Feel free to write to us for a copy of these instruments.