

The Phenomenon of Overcompensation

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Individual Psychology considers the attitude of an individual toward the experience of failing as a decisive factor in his personality development. The experience of failure may discourage the individual, and consequently lower his élan, his zest for accomplishment. He may withdraw in an attempt to avoid further failing. Put to a test, the recurrence of failure is only natural. However, for the discouraged individual this renewed experience of failing will serve as a confirmation of his feared inability, and thus lead to further withdrawal. On the other hand, there are individuals who, in the case of failing, not only do not give up, but try the harder. They are untiring in their attempts to reach their goal, and in the end find their efforts rewarded. They may not only reach their goal, but go even farther and show exceptional achievements. Demosthenes is a classic example.

According to this hypothesis there seem to be mainly two ways of adjustment to the experience of failure: attack or withdrawal, and their various modifications.

Forty-four college students were examined, and autobiographical compositions were used to determine the kind of the reported failures, the attitude toward the experience of failure and the reactions to it in the subjects involved. A thorough analysis of a number of cases which showed the phenomenon of overcompensation led to the postulation of a hypothetical theory, which may contribute to the understanding of the dynamics of overcompensation.

Subject 23 reports of his early stammering:

"Early in my life I was the object of ridicule by my father because of stammering and a general lack of fluency in oral expression. His mimicking and laughter were, at times, infuriating, and served to shake further my confidence in my speech, to precipitate emotional expectancy manifested in anxiety to express myself favorably. The fact that he too stammered (which explains his pleasure in belittling others) provided only slight consolation for the humiliation."

What became of this stammerer?

"I majored in speech, engaged in considerable extracurricular dramatics and radio, and, after graduation, worked in the field of speech correction."

All childhood recollections of S 23, as well as later incidents in his life, have one characteristic in common: belligerence. He is a fighter, and he cannot take defeat. He fights mentally with arguments, and he fights actually with his fists. In case of defeat, he still wins through rationalizing:

"A female class mate, Susie, had been throwing snow balls at me. She and I were straightway ordered upon the green carpet of the principal's office. Susie's only defense was that I had 'dared' her to do it. She was sternly reprov'd for the unseemly act and told not to throw snowballs, even if someone did 'dare' her. Then she was told to go home. I remained to explain why I had urged such a well-behaved girl to be guilty of such flagrant misbehavior. Teacher was using the third switch when I 'broke down and cried.' I explained to my waiting comrades, 'She wouldn't have made me cry, only I knew she wouldn't stop until I cried.' "

Thus the boy rationalized his defeat into a victory over the teacher; it was in his power to make the teacher stop.

There are, however, incidents when he adjusted himself to difficulties by withdrawal, e.g., by "playing hookey." But he turns such a withdrawal into a victory over his mother:

"Because I disliked walking two miles to school, and had been in a fight with a different boy each day of the first week in defense of my 'city ways' and was progressing toward bigger adversaries instead of smaller ones, and because the teacher 'had it in for me,' I heeded nature's beckoning finger one bright morning and spent the day listening to her silent teachings in preference to Miss Baker's shrill voice. My mother discovered my truancy in the afternoon, and as a result of the ensuing argument, it was decided that I need not return to school until the next month, when Father planned to move back to the city. I was secretly proud of my victory over Mother, and for years afterwards, I managed to 'play hookey' from school by some means or other."

His fighting attitude does not disappear after his return to the city:

"After we moved to the city, I continued my budding pugilistic career by qualifying as an enemy of the 'Third Street Gang.' Now, my status reversed, I was fighting because the gang called me a 'country jake.'"

It fits well into the picture of overcompensation that the initial experience of this fighter was extreme fear. The following is a report of his very first childhood recollection:

"I remember being pecked by a belligerent rooster and reacting with extreme fright. Several times after that I had nightmares which were

probably related to the experience. I was frightened by an owl at about the same time, so it is understandable why I dreamed of being pursued by an enormous bird, eight or ten feet tall."

Why does this fear not lead into discouragement, withdrawal, introversion?

It is easy to see from the reports of S 23 that his environment set a premium on his fighting spirit. His belligerent attitude was encouraged by his father, who always admired his victories:

"I vaguely remember, at the age of five, hearing a conversation between Mrs. Foster, a neighbor, and my mother. I was at that particular time resting underneath a davenport in an adjoining room. Mrs. Foster related that she had witnessed the bouncing of a rock from the head of her son, Junior. At the same time she saw me heading homeward at a rate of speed which I had never been known to attain when leaving a game of 'cowboys and Indians.' It seems there had been a difference of opinion as to who should be the leader of the cowboys. Mother was sincerely shocked and assured her neighbor that a severe punishment was in store for her erring boy. I remained under the davenport until my father came home from the office. A lengthy argument between Father and Mother ensued, but in the end Father patted my head and proudly asserted, 'he did right in taking his own part.' Mother went into the bedroom with a headache."

S 23 describes the attitude of his parents toward him in the following statements:

"Father continually defended me and evinced considerable pride in his offspring's belligerence and 'independence.' Mother continually strived to teach me the principles of brotherly love, cooperation and Christian living."

He expressed in his reports warm admiration and affection for his mother—but he calls Father

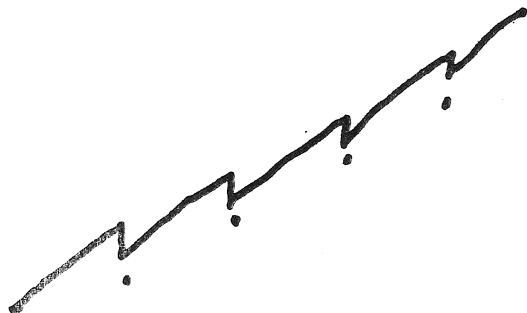
"a great pal with whom I have always gotten along beautifully (except for a few arguments which don't count now) and who has always 'stuck up' for me."

However, we remember that this same father made fun of the boy's stammering, and we read more about Father's belittling and scornful attitude in a report on debates, in which the whole family found much pleasure:

“Early in life, I confined my debates to discussions with my siblings and my mother, but as verbal facility grew and my own opinion of my fund of knowledge inflated itself, I graduated to debates of increasing warmth with my father. Increased speaking facility and fluency would logically have been the result of that experience; but another factor asserted itself here. Father enjoyed arguing. He also enjoyed the self-elevation that comes with winning an argument. Most of the time he did win. However, as I grew older, there were occasional discussions in which there was a question as to whether the parent was the victor. When Father was not sure that he was winning an argument, his favorite conclusion was to accuse me of having ‘crazy ideas,’ to say I stammered, and then he proceeded to mimic my hesitating speech. Considerable decrease in my confidence in my speech resulted. I tended to withdraw from expression of my ideas in class and social situations, because I feared that I couldn’t express myself without hesitation and that the reaction would be the same that my father had often given.”

S 23 reports repeatedly of similar experiences, distinct failure experiences, which discouraged him and hindered his progress. Such relapses, however, were always only temporary. They operated as a challenge, led to harder efforts, to more effective training and, therefore, in the end to higher results—to overcompensation.

We see, then, that overcompensation, which without doubt was established in this case where the stammerer became a speech expert, did not come about in a line which led straight upward, but rather in a movement which ran like this:



It is, however, doubtful whether the repeated failure experiences would have had a challenging effect if the individual in question had not possessed the trait of aggression, and had not been encouraged by the fundamentally trustful relationship between his parent and him. Furthermore, it seems that the individual must necessarily reach a point where he deliberately decides whether to continue his efforts or to give up.

"An incident which I feel definitely affected the choice of a life occupation, which fate made for me, and consequently affected my personality, occurred in an English class. I was called on to deliver an oral report. It seemed simple enough; I had only to read it. I had told myself for days that it was nothing to worry about, no sense in getting nervous. But the more I lectured on the non-importance of oral reports, the more important they became. By the time the teacher said, 'And now, *The Social Implications in George Eliot's Novels*,' the physiological changes that occur with emotion happened with full force. I stood before the class, my knees quaked, the paper shook in my hand, and my voice cracked. It was not until the end of the report that the outward manifestation of fear became less noticeable.

"The self-anger and humiliation, the debates with myself that followed, brought forth the conclusion that one of two alternatives must be taken. I must either give up speaking before groups, or I must overcome my fear of speaking situations. Here, the influences in my previous life that contributed to a favorable adjustment exerted an influence on my decision. I had had enough successes in previous speech situations to convince me that it was possible to overcome the fear of speech situations. Anger at my poor performance was sufficient to provide a drive to remedy the personal fault. From then on I forced myself into public speaking. I majored in speech, engaged in considerable extracurricular dramatics, and radio, and after graduation worked in the field of speech correction."

To be sure, not in all cases of overcompensation is such a crucial point for the development of this phenomenon reported. However, the deliberate decision to make a continuous effort in order to overcome a definite difficulty is found so often that it can be considered as an essential characteristic of overcompensation.

S 23 overcompensated in the field of his failure, in speech; he overcompensated directly. We may assume that individuals who overcompensate directly will be personalities who are unable to face defeat. They have no other way out of a difficulty than to attack it, and to work hard on it; they crave for superiority, for power. If this assumption is correct, we should be able to trace this desire for power also in other expressions of their personality pattern. Thus we expect S 23 to display this drive for power, when called upon to make three wishes. He writes:

"Being given three wishes with no reservations places upon us, who have become aware of our social obligations, a grave responsibility. We naturally want to satisfy our selfish desires, but if we can at the same time benefit our fellow human beings it behooves us to do so. As a means to the end I would desire, these are my three wishes:

1. Immunity to death for a period of one hundred years. This would give me the means toward a number of personal desires—money, a woman, power to help free the world from oppression, and establish democratic government throughout the world.
2. That I find a woman who would always love me. All of the worldly ends that the first wish would grant would not insure that essential to my complete happiness.
3. That I retain all the human characteristics I now have. The 'superman' role, which the first wish would give me, must not deprive me of the simple joys, sorrows, sympathy and understanding that human beings are endowed with."

There is no doubt indeed that someone who wants to defeat death, to be loved forever, and to combine with his superman role the ability to enjoy the simple joys of daily life, is striving for power and superiority all around. He has to get everything he wants, he is unable to sacrifice anything. As he cannot face defeat, it is obvious that he will compensate in the field of his original failure. He is bound to attack the difficulty directly.

In another case, Subject 30, we see that such attacks can lead to pseudo-successes. The girl experienced a social defeat, and soon afterwards she learned, by chance, of the deep impression she could make by displaying a wild temper. Although this impression was certainly not a favorable one, it gave her the deep satisfaction of being noticed, of gaining a social reputation, even if it was the reputation of being a "wildcat." She attempted to live up to this reputation to the best of her abilities. She reports:

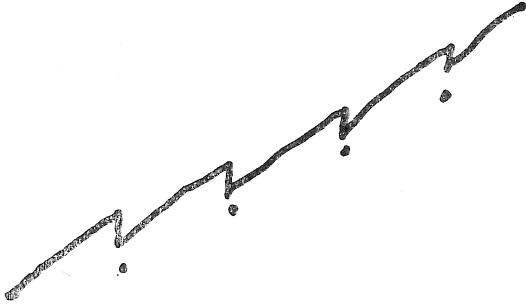
"In the fifth, sixth and seventh grades, I became known as the 'wildcat,' and organized a girls' club to fight physically with the boys of our grade. We developed a secret code, rules for our gang, officer positions, strategy, etc. I was the chief fighter, even going so far as to cut notches in my fingernails, the better to scratch the boys with."

As might be expected, this "overcompensation" did not serve its purpose when the girl grew up. However, her "trained temper" had become habitual, and it was not easy to change into a calm controlled person. Thus, S 30 rationalizes:

"I find that I enjoy the company of people who are sensitive enough to become emotional once in a while. They are more interesting to me than the people who always try to remain calm and undisturbed."

S 30 is perfectly aware of her rationalization, and, in fact, tries hard to reach her true goal: genuine social achievement. Again, we find in this

case those crucial points in the development of overcompensation, where the girl deliberately tries to change herself and to continue her efforts with all her strength. Such crucial moments repeat themselves, and seem to lead to increasing successes. Returning to the line, picturing the movement in the development of overcompensation, we find these to be the starting points of the upward strokes. (The periods indicate the crucial points.)



“Upon being graduated from grammar school I vowed to myself that I would change. A new school, different boys and girls, new teachers—all represented a chance to turn over a new leaf. I wanted, desperately, to be nicer, not to get angry so quickly, to be sweet to people even if I detested them, and perhaps to find some friendships that would last a life-time. That was my goal. I must have felt the need for more social approval to try to change so drastically. As it turned out, I did not change very much. True, I joined a sorority and many clubs, became an officer of two of them, but even so, I knew I still was never considered a ‘sweet’ girl. I had friends, but I knew that I was hard to get along with occasionally. Strangely enough (it seems strange to me now that I should have wanted so much to change) upon being graduated from high school, I vowed the same thing. College would be another chance to redo myself.”

The belligerence, which had been a significant trait in the personality of S 23, is found again in the “wildcat.” The desire for power and superiority, which characterized S 23, is well matched by S 30’s drive for perfection. Even after an influential college teacher got her to accept her limitation in the academic field, she was still not able to accept being less accomplished in social matters than her friend.

“I’ll never be satisfied until I prove myself as successful as she, yet I am quite sure I will be able to do so some day.”

It can be stated that aggressiveness, or even belligerence, is a significant trait of individuals who overcompensate for their shortcomings directly, since it is found in all cases of this kind.

Subject 35 reports how she reacted after being told by the head of the physical education school, whom she had consulted on her future plans, that she was not "particularly good teaching material":

"Ever since I can remember I was going to be a 'gym teacher like Dad.' After much weeping and self-pity, I decided that what I wanted was Physical Education, and that I was going to teach in spite of the head of the department. It was a great satisfaction to me when, at the end of my senior year, I was first in my class academically for five semesters, and had received an A in my practice teaching. I am exceedingly glad that I got 'fighting mad,' for I am really interested in my teaching and in my summer camp work."

In this case, we see again that challenging the ability of the individual produced the urgent and continuous drive for achievement which led to overcompensation in the end. The girl reports of a similar challenge with respect to her camp work:

"My first year I followed a very remarkable woman, and being young, I tried very hard to live up to her reputation. She has a statewide reputation, is very well known in the National Red Cross, and had a creative talent, which I never possessed. Many times that first year I got so discouraged and so tired of hearing people say, 'Pop used to do it this way,' that I wanted to leave. But, being afraid of the disapproval of my parents and of myself, I stuck it out. The next year I was asked back. By that time, I was establishing my own reputation. Besides running a waterfront, I could call square dances, run off game contests, and plan rainy day programs (all things I learned in physical education courses). The memory of my predecessor was fading, so I didn't have that to combat. The director told me that I was adding much to camp life, and my self-confidence began to increase. Again my contract was renewed. This last summer at the end of two and a half weeks I left camp for an emergency appendectomy. The director, knowing I couldn't come back as waterfront director, asked me back as assistant director."

These essential characteristics of aggression and of challenging discouragement pertain only to the phenomenon of direct overcompensation. It is reasonable to assume that shy, fearful, hesitant individuals will not adjust themselves to failures by attacking the difficulty, but will evade the issue, and therefore will be driven into another field for overcompensation. We find individuals who compensate for physical inferiority by wit, or the ability to recite well, or other similar achievements.

Subject 41 is a fearful individual who suffers from episodes of melancholia. All her childhood recollections indicate fear: an unfortunate experi-

ence with dogs, which led to a phobia of dogs; a severe whipping at the age of three for taking some pennies; a bad car accident, resulting in a fear of driving. During her early adolescence, she was overweight and was very unhappy about it. However, she did not attack the assumed cause of her unhappiness directly, but used it for compensation in another field:

"I suffered from spasms of melancholia and had deep feelings of depression. This was all due to a physical handicap which turned out to be within my control. I was definitely overweight—being five feet one inch tall and weighing one hundred ninety-two pounds. . . . Although I was aware of my figure, I didn't try to make myself as inconspicuous as possible. . . . I used my fatness as the butt of my joking, calling myself a two-ton-truck, or as I walked by, saying 'Here comes the 'life' charge of the light brigade.' Because of this, I was considered the 'life' of the party, and I was never left out of group gatherings."

Such "overcompensation" could have only a temporary value. This fearful girl needed the extended and efficient help of an older sister in order to attack her feeling of social inferiority. Part of this attack involved losing weight. The loss of weight did not solve the problem immediately, but encouragement followed by social success, linked with an improved appearance, improved her status.

"This one week was a turning point in my personality development. There were boys there from another city who didn't know of my past obesity. I was surprised and pleased to find myself attractive to boys, where it never had happened before. I wouldn't believe that I was the girl I had always wanted to be."

Subject 39 is another case of an overcompensating perfectionist. This is well demonstrated in her reports on dancing, and on skating. By careful, deliberate training, she became an excellent dancer; typically, she uses the words: "I became known as one of the best dancers." However, she did not master skating to perfection, and, consequently, she considers her skating performance as a failure, "feeling like the proverbial cow on ice"—while her friends find that she skates as well as anyone. A remark in a report on her fear of accidents strikingly reveals her "perfectionist" attitude. The same girl, who was unable to stand the sight of an accident, overcompensated for this by efficiency in emergency situations, and remarks with respect to the other members of her family: "I am the best one to handle them."

SUMMARY

The analysis of those cases that adjust to failures by overcompensation shows that they have certain common characteristics:

1. Overcompensation does not develop in a movement which follows a straight line toward the goal, but occurs following challenging situations which block the development temporarily and which lead into a more urgent and more effective striving toward the goal.

2. These challenging situations are crucial moments in the development of overcompensation, in which the individual considers the situation with profound seriousness, and decides to put all his efforts into reaching his goal.

3. Individuals, compensating directly, show the trait of aggression, or even of belligerence.

4. Individuals who overcompensate are frequently perfectionists.

5. There is always some encouraging influence in the environment of such individuals.