

# THE RESEARCH FRONTIER



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## WHERE IS SCIENCE TAKING US?

*To a deeper understanding of ourselves, it is to be hoped. Up to now, however, this objective is not too much more than a hope. The study of mental and emotional states remains in its infancy. Psychoanalysis, by common repute the most effective form of treatment, has not yet demonstrated its value in experiments accepted as conclusive by any major segment of medicine. Spontaneous remission of symptoms occurs in a very large number of cases where no treatment has been given. Eighty of the 182 pages of the first issue of "International Journal of Psychiatry" (dated January 1965) are given over to a professional discussion of the implications of these facts.*

*Meanwhile, Little, Brown and Company, of Boston, has published a book titled "Positive Disintegration." In its pages is roughly outlined a new theory of mental*

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**K**AZIMIERZ DABROWSKI, M.D., Ph.D., is a professor in the Polish Academy of Science and director of the Institute of Child Psychiatry and Mental Hygiene in Warsaw. Although his work is almost unknown in the United States because of poor communication between Poland and the West, he has during the past thirty years published in Polish, French, German, and Spanish more than fifty papers and five books on child psychiatry—all written from one distinctive point of view of personality development. He refers to this view as *the theory of positive disintegration*. The theory recognizes and emphasizes positive aspects of what are usually described in Western psychiatric literature as negative or "pathological" symptoms of mental illness.

Dabrowski postulates a developmental instinct: that is, a tendency of man to evolve from lower to higher levels of personality. He argues that personality develops primarily through dissatisfaction with, and fragmentation of, the existing psychic structure. Responding to disharmonies within the self and in adaptation to the external environment, the individual "disintegrates." Anxiety, psychoneurosis, and psychosis are symptoms of this disintegration; they mark a period of involution, psychopathology, and retrogression to a lower level of psychic functioning. Finally reintegration occurs at a higher level. The personality evolves to a new plateau of psychic health. Adaptation, both within the self and to the environment, is again adequate to cope with the challenges of existence.

I repeat: Dabrowski does not consider the pattern just described as aberrational. On the contrary, he feels that no personality growth ever takes place without periods of disintegration. He therefore regards anxiety, psychoneurosis, and even some symptoms of psychosis as often healthy rather than always pathological.

When are depressions, anxiety, and other psychotic symptoms positive? Dabrowski gives several criteria: 1) when the symptoms arise during periods of developmental crises or of extreme stress; 2) when both insight and a capacity for emotional closeness are present; 3) when there is involvement of the whole person instead of merely the appearance of narrow symptoms which do not arouse the person's own concern; and 4) when there is a balance of retrospection and introspection.

The roots of this Dabrowski view of personality may be traced to the concepts of three earlier scientists. Hughlings Jackson, the English neurologist, dealt with the evolutionary development of the central nervous system from lower to higher forms of organization. The Polish psychiatrist, Jan Mazurkiewicz, applied Jackson's views of evolution and dissolution of the nervous system to study of mental states. And Jean Piaget, the Swiss psychologist, in studying the development of reasoning and speech in children, has mapped person-

ality growth in terms of a gradual unfolding of abilities in the child.

Dabrowski extends Jackson's theory of evolutionary development of the central nervous system to the psychological development of the personality. Like Mazurkiewicz, Dabrowski places emphasis on self-determination and incorporates Piaget's views of the progressive unfolding of abilities. Above all, however, Dabrowski emphasizes the positive function of conflict and anxiety.

Dabrowski relates his concept to a variety of empirical data, everyday observations, and clinical experience.

First, psychological examination of normal children in Warsaw public schools, who were judged by their teachers to be above average in intelligence and well-adapted, has shown that about 80 per cent have different symptoms of nervousness and slight neurosis such as mild anxiety, phobias, inhibitions, slight tics, and different forms of over-excitability. Dabrowski regards this as evidence that psychiatric symptoms are frequent in children who have a high potential for personality development.

Second, in normal development greatest personality growth occurs during periods of greatest psychological upheaval, for example during puberty—evidence that anxiety and nervousness can be accompanied by accelerated development.

Third, severe environmental stress often may, in producing psychological crises, contribute to creativity and growth—evidence that situations of stress can precipitate development.

Finally, in highly-creative persons, periods of psychological disharmony are often present and related to the creativeness—evidence of the positive correlation between creativity and different states of disintegration.

In the West the most broadly accepted theoretical model of intrapsychic conflict and symptom formation is that of psychoanalysis. Early in its development, psychoanalysts regarded frustration as negative and encouraged extreme permissiveness in child-rearing. But it was soon recognized that experience with conflict was an essential part of growth. Either extreme conflict or complete absence of conflict led to psychological difficulties.

Psychoanalysis conceptualizes a disequilibrium among id, ego, and superego as leading to symptom formation, to new or strengthened defenses, or to growth. Two American psychoanalysts, Erich Lindemann and Eric Erikson, have particularly concerned themselves with the social and psychological aspects of development.

Lindemann's contributions to psychosocial understanding have come to be known as "crisis theory." He describes the individual as normally in a state of equilibrium in relation to his environment. Occasionally, the individual may meet a situation which he is unable to handle with his usual homeo-

## The Positive Role of Mental Crisis

illness which, if proved correct in practice, would help to explain the high automatic remission rate. The theory emphasizes the role of conflict in personality development of all individuals. The theory says that neuroses and even some psychoses are essential to the growth of every human. Accordingly, many symptoms now assigned to illness may actually be signs of healthy creative expansion.

The "theory of positive disintegration" is the work of Kazimierz Dabrowski, M.D., Ph.D., a professor at the Polish Academy of Science and director of the Institute of Child Psychiatry and Mental Hygiene in Warsaw. He has written several scores of scientific papers and three books on the subject in the last thirty years—all in languages other than English. From these papers and books, from talks with Professor Dabrowski in Poland and in this country, and through exchange of correspondence and manuscripts with the professor and his staff in Warsaw, Dr. Jason Aronson, an instructor in psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, edited the volume since published in English by Little, Brown. The text below is a version of the introduction to the book, revised and expanded by Dr. Aronson for SR/Research.

static methods; he becomes emotionally upset. An emotionally hazardous situation (or emotional hazard) is a sudden alteration in the field of social forces within which the individual exists, such that his expectations of himself and his relationships with others are changed. Examples are: loss of a significant relationship, introduction of new individuals to the social orbit, transition in role in relationships at the beginning of adolescence or in marriage or job promotion.

During such a crisis the individual shows increased tension, unpleasant affect, and disorganized behavior. His attempts at solution may result in his return to his former psychic equilibrium, or may advance him to a healthier integration, or (if the problem has been beyond his capacity to handle) he may fail to adapt and instead may restore equilibrium at a lower level of integration.

In the course of life, all people experience many such crises, the outcome of which determine their personalities, their creativity, and their mental health.

What Lindemann describes as "crisis" (increased tension, unpleasant affect, and disorganized behavior) Dabrowski terms "symptoms of disintegration." Although this process may have either a positive or negative outcome, Dabrowski feels that in the vast majority of cases the outcome is positive. Dabrowski sees a negative outcome only when the environmental situation is very unfavorable or when a severe physiological process is present.

In his description of emotionally hazardous situations, Lindemann emphasizes an alteration in the field of social forces. The press of maturation is seen as causing an emotional hazard through effecting a change in role relationships. Dabrowski hypothesizes an internal disposition to development: the instinct of development. He regards external hazards as stimuli to the activity of this tendency, and, therefore, in general, advantageous to personality development. If the instinct of development is strong, he feels that emotional hazards always have favorable consequences.

The similarities between Lindemann's crisis theory and Dabrowski's theory of positive disintegration are striking, but less surprising, however, when one recognizes that both men have been concerned with similar problems in preventive psychiatry. Lindemann, professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School and psychiatrist-in-chief at Massachusetts General Hospital, has been concerned with problems of community health in the mental health services of his hospital and at the Wellesley Human Relations Service which he organized in 1948. Dabrowski, who organized the Institute for Mental Hygiene in Warsaw in 1935, and who is presently director of the Institute for Mental Hygiene and Child Psychiatry of the Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw, has been dealing with the same questions.

Erik Erikson, in his theoretical contributions to ego-psychology, has described specific conflicts in eight different stages.

The outcome of the first crisis, which occurs in early infancy, determines whether the individual's inner mood is characterized by *basic trust* or by *basic mistrust*. Erikson regards this outcome as depending largely on the quality of maternal care. The second stage is the crisis of *autonomy vs. shame*, determining which of these states will characterize the individual. The third conflict (part of what Freud has described as the Oedipus complex) is *initiative vs. guilt*, involving resolution of affectionate feeling toward the mother and competitive feelings toward the father. The fourth crisis arises in the child's learning and collaboration with others; its outcome determines the relative strength of his sense of *industry* as compared to his sense of *inferiority*. The fifth stage, *the identity crisis*, has been the major focus of Erikson's attention. He defines ego identity as the accrued confidence that one's ability to maintain inner sameness and continuity is matched by the sameness and continuity of one's meaning for others. The sixth, seventh, and final crises are *intimacy vs. isolation*, *generativity vs. self-absorption*, and *integrity vs. despair and disgust*—integrity here referring to the acceptance of a sense of order and meaning in life.

In Erikson's view of human growth, the solution of each of the eight crises is dependent on the solution of earlier ones. Erikson's concepts of ego synthesis and resynthesis in the development of identity are similar to Dabrowski's concepts of disintegration and reintegration in personality development.

Although Dabrowski has not concerned himself with specific conflicts at various stages of development, he agrees with Erikson in placing particular emphasis on the *identity vs. identity diffusion* conflict. In Dabrowski's terminology, this conflict is described as the arising of self-awareness and self-criticism (the "third factor," Dabrowski calls it).

Neither Lindemann nor Erikson has written specifically on the positive functions of acute psychoses. That anxiety, even psychoneurosis, may have a positive function in personality development is not inconsistent with current attitudes in Western psychiatry; but that psychoses (the persecutory delusions of paranoia, the hallucinations and withdrawal of a schizophrenic, and the wild hyperactivity of a maniac) may play a positive role in an individual's maturation . . . that falls strangely on our ears. We tend to view psychosis as a *failure* of defense, the surrender of attempts at adaptation.

Yet, a few Western psychiatrists have proposed that psychoses may have a positive function. Thomas French and Jacob Kasonin, in an article published in 1941, presented the hypothesis that a schizophrenic episode "may be a transitional episode in the process of emancipation from an old method of adjustment and 'learning' a new one," and that the patient

may achieve on recovery "a better social adjustment than had been possible before the illness." More recently, Gregory Bateson, in a brief introduction to a patient's story of psychosis, suggests that schizophrenia is a "vast and painful initiation rite conducted by the self" and running a definite course toward birth of a new identity.

Dabrowski's *theory of positive disintegration* antedates these independent reachings in the direction of his conclusions. Hence Dabrowski's theory is not only interesting but even exciting in the breadth and depth of its implications. The ubiquity of psychological symptoms has always confounded a simple descriptive psychopathological approach to mental illness. Dabrowski's theory gives these symptoms a role in normal personality development that is consistent with their broad distribution as shown by epidemiological studies and as felt by those aware of the problems in themselves and in those around them.

But intellectual excitement is not the best criterion of meaningfulness. What is the scientific status of Dabrowski's *theory of positive disintegration*? Is this a fundamental contribution to psychiatric theory? Are his concepts a more adequate model for personality development than other theories?

The answers to these questions depend on more thorough definitions of Dabrowski's concepts than are available in his writings. His concepts of third factor, disposing and directing center, uni-level and multi-level disintegration are not precisely defined clinically and their exact meanings are vague. This is not to say that these concepts cannot be defined precisely, only that clear definition is not yet achieved. There is, of course, considerable variation in the degree of precision and clarity of concepts of other personality theories. These problems of definition are not unique to Dabrowski's work.

And, too, more than meaningfully defined concepts is necessary for a theory to achieve scientific status. It must show broader explanatory power than alternate theoretical models. As described above, the phenomena conceptualized by Dabrowski can be stated in other theoretical terms. Moreover, a

theory of personality is functional. It is relevant to a broad range of problems: treating emotionally disturbed patients, planning educational programs, and raising children. The clinical usefulness of Dabrowski's ideas is only hinted at in his essays.

The *theory of positive disintegration* suggests a number of research possibilities. There are developmental studies which might be done. For example, one might select a group of "normal" children and carefully follow their development over a number of years, observing such psychological symptoms as anxiety, depression, withdrawal, or disassociation. Some questions one might ask of the data collected are: What is the incidence of psychiatric symptoms in the course of development? Is I.Q. correlated with the incidence of symptoms? Do those children who experience more psychological crises end up more nearly fulfilling their potential?

There are epidemiologic studies that might be done too. For example, one might select a population of "normal" adults and investigate the incidence of psychological symptoms. In such a survey one should not only count symptoms but also obtain some measure of the ability and productivity of the individuals under study in order to better evaluate the symptoms. What is often regarded as "psychological deficit" may be positively correlated with productivity and be perhaps a sign of positive disintegration. If one were to regard all symptoms as signs of psychological deficit, the results would be shocking. (The New York City *Midtown Study* of 1660 adults showed 81.5% to have "psychological deficit.")

Another type of study might examine intensively a group of exceptionally creative individuals. Are psychological symptoms related to their development and productivity?

Of course, like man, no theory is born an adult ready to meet all challenges. But, if the *theory of positive disintegration* is to develop through adolescence to maturity, progressive clarification of its terms, of the breadth of its explanatory power, and of its practical implications, are questions it must meet and handle.

## LETTERS TO THE SCIENCE EDITOR

### Two-Shot Earthmen

I WAS GREATLY pleased by Fred Hoyle's article [SR, Nov. 7] concerning man's lack of uniqueness in the universe. With one point, however, I must take issue. Dr. Hoyle states that, "with coal gone, oil gone, high-grade metallic ores gone, no species, however competent, can make the long climb from primitive conditions to high level technology. This is a one-shot affair. If we fail, this planetary system fails so far as intelligence is concerned. The same will be true of other planetary systems. On each of them there will be one chance, and one chance only." He believes that if the human species fail on earth, some other species will not "take over the running" due to a lack of energy sources and raw materials. However, he overlooks the fact that, over geological time, buildings and machines of our civilization will weather away to form a sedimentary rock which can be enriched by the same chemical processes that resulted in our present-day ores. Coal and oil, too, will be formed once again, given enough time. If man has disappeared, there will be an opportunity for another dominant (though doubtless different) species

to evolve with time, from among the species remaining on earth. This species will have available high-grade ores and fuel supplies. In short, civilization need not be limited to one shot per planet, but to several, over geological time.

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### Why a Plan?

IN HIS FASCINATING "Can We Learn From Other Planets?" (SR, Nov. 7), Fred Hoyle says "Intelligent life is such a remarkable phenomenon to emerge out of the basic physical laws..." that it justifies an hypothesis that *plan* exists. Except that an hypothesis does not imply a conclusion, this method of thinking verges upon that by which the gods were created to explain the unknown.

Is intelligent life more remarkable than, for instance, a blade of grass? Dr. Hoyle suggests that earthly existence is influenced and affected by the "out there," which I take to mean the entire universe. Since both grass and intellect are products of the cosmos it is necessary, in order to understand either, to understand the cosmos. That feat is no greater in understanding intellect than in understanding grass. So why is plan

suggested more by intellect than by grass?

Again, Dr. Hoyle says, "I do not doubt that it would be possible to inject ideas into the modern world that would utterly destroy us." May I volunteer an absurd example? I'm sure I, at least, shall be utterly destroyed if the idea gains advocates. It is—*Eradicate believing from the minds of men!*

This does not mean that error, groping, ignorance would suddenly give place to understanding and wisdom, nor does it mean that understanding and wisdom would be crippled. On the contrary. It means that, deprived of resort to that lowest form of conscious cerebration, that primitive form of non-thought, believing, mankind would be forced to rely upon the processes of understanding, the one faculty of the human mind that gives it superiority over that of the ape.

Understanding requires use of the brain. Believing, in its purest degree, is accomplished best by very primitive people; it does not need, nor does it permit, understanding.

On one of those distant planets imagined by Dr. Hoyle may be an intelligent life that is unable to believe. I'll bet it has us beaten a million years.

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ON THE WAY toward answering the ques-