

Theory of Positive Disintegration as a Basis for Research on Assisting Development

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Dabrowski's ideas about personality development are not only a source of practical recommendations for assisting the development of persons of varied age but can also be an inspiration for research. The theory is exceptionally helpful in describing developmental phenomena. Cases of multilevel development were studied in autobiographies of 7 participants. Research results not only confirm the basic assumptions of the theory but are a fitting point of departure for further investigations of human development. This study showed that the beginnings of positive disintegration could be traced to between ages 5 and 7. In addition, an understanding adult plays a key role in the transition from unilevel to multilevel development, and religion and art play a significant role in multilevel development.

In his approach to human development, Kazimierz Dabrowski (1996a) emphasized multilevelness as the principal concept of his theory, which has numerous consequences. Above all it is a way of thinking about development as a process largely independent of biologically programmed stages and perceiving it as transcending cultural and environmental influences. Multilevel development goes beyond adaptation to social expectations. Despite individual differences of development potential—that is, the potential readiness for development—the essence of development through positive disintegration is a deliberate effort to advance in an increasingly mature manner through successively higher levels of experiencing outer and inner realities.

The concept of multilevelness has been described by Michael M. Piechowski (1975), Dabrowski's long-standing collaborator, as: "a new paradigm of human development." He noted that it is

less meaningful to consider, for instance, aggression, inferiority, empathy or sexual behavior as unitary phenomena, but it becomes more meaningful to examine their different levels. Love and aggression at the lowest level of development differ less than the lowest and the highest level of love, or the lowest and highest level of aggression. (p. 246)

Because a qualitative change of that sort can take place or become intensified at any stage of adult life, it is not directly linked to developmental tasks typical for a given stage. The chance for development in Dabrowski's sense does not diminish with age. However, there are certain conditions that must be met. They are tied to the *individual* developmental potential and the ability to recognize and engage it.

Contemplating individual developmental potential and ways to engage or strengthen it, we must start with the basic assumptions of the theory of positive disintegration (TPD). Dabrowski (1996a) linked developmental potential with five forms of psychic overexcitability (psychomotor, sensual, imaginal, intellectual, and emotional) that are primarily biologically based. Although there are cases when the biological endowment in the form of emotional and intellectual overexcitability, not being suitably channeled, becomes the cause of "negative disintegration," the overexcitabilities can be shaped through education. According to the author of TPD, it is also possible to strengthen the development potential by the "sensitizing" influence of art, religion and philosophy (Dabrowski, 1996b). The configuration of overexcitabilities determines for each individual a different way of assisting development.

We must also bear in mind the fact that apart from the aforementioned overexcitabilities, another important part of individual developmental potential is the group of developmental dynamisms. They are at once a developmental achievement and the instruments of advancing it further (cf. Piechowski, 1981). The first developmental level of primary integration lacks developmental dynamisms. According to Dabrowski, they first emerge at the second level and are associated with the states of depression, ambivalence, and

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ambivalence that accompany it. The subsequent levels (the third, fourth, and fifth) are characterized by the emergence of developmental dynamisms linked with the possibility of a conscious shaping of the process of one's own development, which is associated with the transformation of a unilevel structure of values into a multilevel hierarchical one with the personality ideal at the top. Such a qualitative change in the psyche characterizes the third level of development, whereas the subsequent two levels are focused on the perfection and clarification of the new possibilities of experiencing the world and one's own self.

By defining the five levels of development and their characteristic dynamisms, Dabrowski (1986, 1996a, 1996b) outlined the direction and the nature of development in sufficient enough detail that one can apply it in clinical and educational practice. At the same time, the theory opens new avenues to research on the conditions of personality development.

The starting point for a specifically individual program of educational or therapeutic work is an evaluation of the biological potential of the individual, his or her developmental history (including the role of the social milieu), and the current state of personality development. Dabrowski (1996b) stressed that "These three groups of factors must be thoroughly elaborated for each individual in order not to weaken them, still less eliminate, but to make full use of them in development and psychological prevention" (p. 105).

In the framework of TPD, the developmental process has an individual and deliberate character. One must take note of the specific meaning of the term *personality* and its practical and theoretical implications. Personality exists as the ideal goal of an individual's development; its vague outline first appears, together with multilevel inner milieu, at the level of spontaneous multilevel disintegration (level III).

The transition from the second to the third level is the greatest qualitative change in the individual's consciousness called by Dabrowski (1984) "the most unexpected developmental change" (p. 39). This is the transition from unilevel to multilevel inner milieu. Through continued development an individual strives to realize the personality ideal, which is not "a fancy, or a philosophical construct, but is accessible to experience, is concrete, and operating in our everyday life" (Dabrowski, 1986, p. 46).

As we can see, according to Dabrowski's theory, personality is the aim of development and thus is always associated with consciously chosen values rather than a result of the influences of the individual's environment independent of his or her will. Personality ideal consists of two mutually related types of essence, the individual and the common (i.e., fundamental and universal to all human beings). Currently, the common essence is also being described as "social essence." The content of individual essence is the person's interests and abilities, emotional attachments with other persons, and the imprints of experiences that constitute a personal path in

life (Dabrowski, 1996b). As a whole, the content of individual essence of each person is unique and therefore unrepeatable. It may be observed in each person even before the emergence of a multilevel inner milieu. However, the "essence of personality" first comes into being with the advent of a multilevel inner milieu. Common essence, on the other hand, creates a metacultural ethical dimension of human social existence based on empathy, authenticity, autonomy, and responsibility (Dabrowski, 1996b). This is where the most significant practical implications of the theory for education are to be found. The indissoluble joining of the universal human values (common essence) with unrepeatable qualities of the individual (individual essence) can lead to the creation of "abilities to grasp things on different levels . . . with specific individual emotional tone and nuance" (Dabrowski, 1975, p. 35).

THE APPLICATION OF THE THEORY OF POSITIVE DISINTEGRATION TO THE STUDY OF PERSONALITY DEVELOPMENT

TPD provides a terminology that facilitates the description of developmental phenomena. Although the terminology is specific enough to be used in educational and therapeutic work, it nevertheless opens many avenues for investigating development and discovering its patterns. Dabrowski outlined an interesting overall order of development, at times indicating further directions to pursue. This is the case of the transition from level II to level III, mentioned earlier, which he treated as one of the enigmas of development. The most interesting, however, seems to be the possibility of going beyond the descriptions provided by the theory and using it as a source of ideas about the developmental process. Thus, the theory may serve as a starting point for research and discovery of new developmental patterns useful in assisting development, on the condition that the need for their further investigation is always kept in mind.

Search for Subjects and the Method of Aided Autobiography

At the Fifth International Conference on the Theory of Positive Disintegration, I presented my research in which TPD had been applied to discover new facts about the developmental process (Mróz, 2002b). I would like to discuss certain implications that flow from it for assisting the development of children, adolescents, and adults.

Three research questions guided the study:

1. In what way are states of disintegration experienced at different stages of development?
2. In what way do relationships with others change at different stages of development?
3. What values are attached to religion and art at different stages of development?

The research comprised two stages: selection of participants and biographical research. The aim of the first stage was an intentional selection of candidates for further research. To find respondents deeply engaged in multilevel growth, I used the Definition Response Instrument designed to assess developmental level according to TPD (Gage, Morse, & Piechowski, 1981). The DRI has a .80 interrater reliability and both convergent and discriminant validity. The instrument consists of six open-ended questions encouraging reflection on one's own individual experiences. The particular themes found in the responses were then assessed for level with the aid of the Miller Assessment Coding System allowing for a level index determination for each of the respondents (Miller, 1985; Miller & Silverman, 1987). Out of 37 asked to participate, 19 filled out the questionnaire, and 7, who met the criterion of a level score above 3.0, became final participants in the study. These respondents displayed evidence of a multilevel psychic milieu and the presence of personality ideal. The majority of their developmental dynamics were of level III and above. They were a nun, 63 years old; a priest, 36; two fine artists, 30 and 36; a female poet, 64; an actor and director, 52; and a pedagogue, 30. Their level scores ranged from 3.3 to 3.8.

The second stage was that of qualitative research. The research material was obtained by the method of aided autobiography (Runyan, 1992), which uses a dialogue format. Each participant took part in three sessions that were tape-recorded and subsequently transcribed. The first two sessions were devoted to the life story itself, prompting questions, and the corrections to my comprehension of what the participants said. The third session was given to checking for understanding and accuracy. To assist the participants in the task of ordering their life experiences I used McAdams's "life-as-story metaphor" as a supporting method (McAdams, 1993). This method allows seeing one's life as a book, which may be divided into chapters, thus making possible an ordering of life experiences and discovery of "turning points" in one's development.

Analysis of the Biographical Material

The first step was a topical ordering of the material. The statements of the participants were classified to one of the following topical categories: meanings assigned to oneself, the experience of relationship with people, meanings assigned to spiritual values (religious, esthetic, and sociomoral). The above categories were selected in accordance with Helling (1990), who suggested that each topical category ought to include all the statements typical of recurring themes of a given interview.

As a method of analyzing the material, I used hermeneutic analysis (Gadamer, 1993; Ricoeur, 1985), which allows the discovery of the meanings that the participants attach to their own developmental experience. Furthermore, hermeneutic analysis makes possible the description of external

conditions that accompanied the transformation of the participant's awareness. However, the most valuable aspect of this type of analysis is the possibility of capturing historically the inner change and the interweaving of the meanings revealed by the participants. These personal meanings, which change in the course of a lifetime, constitute, in each case, a unique dynamic developmental structure. Common threads of these individual structures led to the recognition of similar developmental tendencies in all seven autobiographies.

RESEARCH RESULTS IN TERMS OF THEORY OF POSITIVE DISINTEGRATION

Some of the findings are immediately applicable to assisting development. They are presented in relation to Dabrowski's theory.

Disintegrative States in Childhood

My research indicates that emotional conflicts in childhood and adolescence, causing disintegrative states significant for development, tend to get started between the 5th and the 7th year of life. This is much sooner than what Dabrowski (1975) suggested, pointing to adolescence as the stage of first important disintegration. However, adolescence appears not so much to be the time when disintegrative states first come into existence as the age when they surface as defenses against negative emotions or as attempts to compensate for frustrated emotional needs. The cause is always either the threat to significant others or disturbances in the relationship with others. Most frequently it was anxiety about parents, the feeling of their unavailability, of not meeting social expectations, or of being different and isolated. These states, operating in the inner psychic milieu, affect development much earlier than adolescence. Taking this into account, it is worth looking for ways of early intervention in order to forestall disturbances in the process of development, which could cause neurotic disorders.

The Key Role of an Understanding Adult

The autobiographical research suggests methods of intervention. In all cases the participants stressed the importance for their further development of emotional contact with an adult. The most important aspect of such a relationship was the *experience of being understood*, of stepping out of isolation and loneliness. Each of the participants experienced such a relationship for the first time at a different age. In one case this did not happen until age 46.

In every case, two distinguishing qualities of such relational experience stood out: its great emotional significance and the fact that further development of personality (the transition from a unilevel to a multilevel inner milieu) never took place before this experience. Thus, one can advance a

hypothesis that the connection with an understanding person is of critical importance for personality development. It bestows a sense of safety and gives the courage to look at oneself objectively, which Dabrowski called a *dynamism of subject-object in oneself*. The later this critical experience of being understood took place in life, or the lower the respondent's self-worth, the stronger was the "self-idealization" after the experience, before finally being able to reach an objective attitude toward oneself. This is probably due to a rapid compensation of a long-lasting need to enhance one's own worth: the deeper the need, the more rapid and more extreme is the initial reaction to need satisfaction. Individual differences notwithstanding, the participants described the experience of change of attitude toward their own selves as being open to one's emotions, discovering the truth about oneself, finding one's place, and naming oneself, which supports the occurrence of a greater authenticity and a stronger trust in one's own self simultaneously.

The Role of Religion and Art in the Process of Development

Religion and art play an important role in how children and adolescents cope with their difficult emotions precipitated by states of unilevel disintegration. Usually this found expression in the following experiences:

1. The experience of God as protecting, understanding, entering into a dialogue with human beings.
2. Experiencing the theater, literature, and art as a source of positive emotions and as an escape from distressing reality.
3. Attempts to do art as a means of giving expression to one's own problems and seeking communication with others.

The participants' early attempts to take up literature, theater, art, or prayer as a defense against fear had the character of flight from a reality they found too hard to live in. In time, these attempts became the main substance of their individual essence realized in adult life. For each one, these attempts were spontaneous, self-determined choices. Taking into account that Dabrowski conceived the developmental process as a dynamic structure of interconnected experiences comprising the whole of a person's life, we can recognize not only the influences that support a child's development directly (i.e., resulting in immediately perceivable effects) but also those early ones that strengthen developmental potential that may be realized in adulthood.

The Joining of Individual and Common Essence in Study Participants

There are enormous therapeutic and educational benefits to be derived from Dabrowski's concept of the joining of individual and common essence in the emerging personality as

the process of creating central qualities (values of essence) that mark the meaning and the goal of individual life. Values of essence, discovered in the course of personal development, are deliberately chosen and become a source of motivation for the most important tasks of one's life. The biographies of the participants in my research illustrate two significant outcomes of this process.

One outcome is the unfolding capacity for autopsychotherapy, which may be seen in coping with crises precipitated by difficult life situations in a way that stimulates further development, rather than allowing for a reversal to earlier partial integration, which is a natural defensive tendency of a unilevel psyche. This transformation of awareness is well pictured by the biography of the nun in my study (Mróz, 2002a). Shortly after joining the cloister, she learned that the rules did not allow visiting one's family. Being only 18 years old, she found this very difficult: "I realized that I will never visit my family. It was very painful for me. It seemed to me that this was something so horrendous that God would change this rule for me. I believed that he was going to do it, because it was impossible [to bear]." When her unilevel value structure changed with time to a multilevel one (she became aware of her personality ideal comprising the essential value of her life), the solution of this problem took another form: "It was hard for me that I could not go and see my parents, but I knew that I wanted to serve God and that I must make a hard sacrifice."

The appearance of a value of essence—faithfulness to God—in the nun's awareness imbued her painful experiences with meaning. It was the beginning of a new capacity to face crises. This developmental achievement could be categorized as autopsychotherapy. One must stress her individuality and her own free will in making that choice, no doubt related to her individual essence. This kind of positive therapy, which Dabrowski (1979b) called "therapy through development," offers not only lasting therapeutic results (the capacity for autopsychotherapy) but favors also a discovery of new values in a personal hierarchy.

Dabrowski (1996b) emphasized the importance of the process of forming a hierarchy of values: "The cognition and experiencing of different levels in oneself, and becoming conscious of the process of crystallization of a concrete developmental ideal is the highest process. What makes it highest is precisely the hierarchy of emotions and the hierarchy of values" (p. 55).

The second developmental outcome, resulting from the joining of individual and common essence, is the opportunity to avoid one-sided development that does not comprise the whole of personality structure but is limited to certain interests or abilities (Dabrowski, 1996a). Dabrowski asserted that in the case of one-sided development the process may take a completely negative form within which the developing functions are tied to an antisocial stance and are used to manipulate others.

When the development of individual interests and talents is linked with the values of common essence as well as with the realization of personality ideal, the fulfillment of one's own potential acquires a wholly new meaning no longer expressed by the best possible social adaptation but by the full, deliberate self-realization or self-creation. This creates the possibility of autopsychotherapy and of adopting an optimal attitude to others.

The analysis of the developmental process of my participants suggests that taking multilevel direction in development can protect not only against unethical use of one's talents but also against other negative eventualities like professional burnout or a dampening of intellectual powers caused by difficulty in overcoming emotional crises. High anxiety, which causes people to become defensive and self-protective, consumes much time and energy and thus renders the fulfillment of one's frequently great creative powers difficult. These creative potentials are part of each person's individual essence. With the emergence of personality ideal the energy becomes unblocked and becomes directed toward creative endeavors. For the participants in my study, the discovery of a superior idea in life (the beginning of the operation of personality ideal) became the strongest motivating force. The anxious focus on oneself diminished, while concentration on realizing the discovered values increased. This engaged their high emotional sensitivity. In their life stories they apprehended these higher values as their guiding principle, which appeared in their consciousness after the transformation from unilevel to a multilevel inner milieu. I have used their own words to render faithfully their life ideal: (a) "to not fail God, who is in me" (female, age 63), (b) "to rely on truth in order to be the human being that others can always rely on" (male, age 36), (c) "to draw out of human beings that which is good, so as not to increase the quantity of evil in the world" (female, age 64), (d) "help yourself to discover the truth in you and in mutual understanding with people" (male, age 36), (e) "to open oneself to one's own emotions that seek wisdom" (male, age 52), (f) "to find a way of existing in a world that brings pain" (male, age 30), and (g) "to name oneself in order to leave a small part of myself in others" (female, age 30). Realization of personality ideal enabled the participants to utilize potentials hidden in their individual essence, not for a neurotic defense but as creative motivation related to the discovery of a new sense of existence.

The participant who said, "To name oneself in order to leave a small part of myself in others" as a child and adolescent lived with an alcoholic father, the cause of many painful home situations. Because of her traumatic childhood she felt she was "without name." She was lacking in self-worth, was shy and awkward in relating to others. In the course of a long process of inner transformation her individual personality ideal became foreshadowed, and with it her value of essence: "To leave a small part of myself in others." The realization of this idea was tied to "naming herself." At the

age of 24 she became an educator working with children from disturbed families. Her own childhood experiences, seen until now exclusively as the source of pain, a sense of being wronged, and low self-worth, acquired a positive meaning. Because of what she had lived through she understood the experiences of the children with whom she was working, and that made her more effective. Her shyness and her sense of being lost diminished. She began to "name herself." In her work with children she resorted to drama techniques, which she learned earlier while pursuing her interests. She went back to school to grow and perfect her work: "For me studies are not a necessity, to get a degree, find work, and show my accomplishments. . . . No, for me studying is a way of going deep, of fostering my own growth. To grow, that's what's important to me." She pointed to the therapeutic value of this experience: "I began to read, I became interested in the subject, and along the way I discovered that I can heal myself." Her development is a clear example of the connection between fashioning the values of essence, the process of autopsychotherapy, and the transition from being self-absorbed to giving attention to others.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The intention behind this article is to describe one of many possible ways in which to apply TPD in research on assisting development.

Although this study was designed not as an affirmation of the assumptions of TPD, nevertheless the characteristic transformations in the respondents' lives demonstrate developmental mechanisms as described by Dabrowski. The main intention was an exploration of TPD as a starting point in further investigation of human development in the whole course of life. Analyzing the results in relation to Dabrowski's theory shows that the creative potential of TPD reaches far beyond the content of the theory itself.

Owing to the qualitative nature of the research, the analysis of the material presents both the results and their implications for developmental assistance. Because the research material has been presented in the preceding section, this section will focus on describing the limitations and difficulties I encountered in the course of the research and on reflecting on the possibilities and necessity of further exploration.

The research on development in the perspective of TPD is linked with the difficulty of finding people at an advanced level of development. This affirms Dabrowski's conviction that the higher the level of development, the fewer people represent it (Dabrowski, 1974).

Another difficulty in my research was the time-consuming nature of the autobiographical research method, which is at times constraining for the respondents who live an active life and are involved in a variety of activities. I am all the more grateful to the participants of my study for the time

they have devoted to me. Furthermore, the respondents may also experience difficulty caused by the necessity to return to life experiences associated with an emotional trauma. Although, owing to their maturity, the respondents in my study coped with the task, one must keep in mind that respondents with weaker autotherapeutic capacity may require additional therapeutic work.

The suggestion of the importance of the experience of being understood by at least one person for the process of development needs confirmation in further research. A discovery of cases of the transformation of a unilevel structure into a multilevel one (i.e., of the emergence of a hierarchical structure of values) without such an experience might create questions about other circumstances or experiences allowing for the transformation.

An interesting possibility for further research is to conduct a study on a homogenous group of respondents—for example, artists or clergy—to follow the process of development of their values of essence and the role of art and religion in the process. A comparison of the meanings that, for instance, the clergy at different levels of development assign to religious values would render a more complete picture of the transformation linked with the merging of the individual and the common essence.

The aspect of the research associated with the mutual connection between the individual and the common essence in development seems particularly significant for readers involved in education of the gifted. From both Dabrowski's suggestions and the present research results, one may draw the conclusion that only multifaceted and multilevel development results in a level of maturity necessary for the proper creative realization of one's potential. The individual potential of skills, talents, and interests acquires the meaning of the individual essence; that is, becomes a value of essence, only after being adapted and placed within a hierarchical structure of values. Then they also become a significant element of autopsychotherapy as their formation supports emotional development. Emotional maturity in its turn influences the way of using one's individual resources not only in self-creation but also in relations with others, which allows the educator to avoid stimulating one-sided development and the accompanying difficulties.

Dabrowski devoted a lot of attention to creative young people and emphasized the positive value of their emotional sensitivity. The stress on the potentially positive meaning of disintegrative states, which, with appropriate support of the developmental potential of the person, may become part of the person's self-creation, is one of the most important implications of the theory. The results of the present research confirm its validity. For 2 participants in the study, their talent development was blocked for many years. Not until the qualitative developmental change—from unilevel to a multilevel inner milieu—did their talents began to unfold fully. In the case of 4 other participants,

their artistic development was propelled by their quest for values that formed their personality ideal.

Dabrowski did not glorify suffering because he was fully aware of its potentially destructive power. In his theory he did not avoid the concept of *negative disintegration* (Dabrowski, 1979a), by which he meant a condition that leads to an emotional destruction of the person. However, pointing to the developmental possibility of resolving states of disintegration, he gave hope to those who, crushed by the weight of their suffering, have lost it. Therefore, assisting persons in their emotional development, and strengthening it, seems to be crucial not only for treating emotional disorders but also for the full reach of the individual's talents and interests.

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