

Chapter 20

Self-Actualization and Morality of the Gifted: Environmental, Familial, and Personal Factors

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Abstract How family, school, and social background contribute to the self-identity and subsequent self-concept and self-esteem of highly gifted individuals may be related to whether or not they eventually self-actualize. The author examined factors that possibly relate to the development of individuals who are self-actualized; and which, if any of these factors, are predictors of highly principled moral reasoning development. Forty-one case studies were analyzed using characteristics of emotional and moral reasoning stages outlined by Erikson, Maslow, Dabrowski, Kohlberg, and Rest. Findings indicate that self-actualization that follows inner transformation is highly correlated with advanced levels of moral reasoning. Such people are not necessarily happier or more successful in careers than subjects who attain lower emotional and moral reasoning growth. There was a significant correlation between scores on Rest's *Defining Issues Test* (DIT) and Dabrowski's and Kohlberg's stages of development. New terms for the study, Searcher and Nonsearcher, appeared to correlate with developmental levels, with Searchers being more likely to eventually self-actualize. Evidence exists that people can become Searchers. Emotional, physical, or sexual abuse in childhood was highly related to both lower and higher DIT scores and Dabrowski levels among highly gifted adults. Those who overcame persistent bitterness over abuse were more likely to become Searchers and eventually self-actualize. Those who do not experience inner transformation but are "good people" and career self-actualizers are generally in the Conventional (Kohlberg) or Stereotypical (Dabrowski) levels of development. Finally, subjects' perceptions that someone significant to them cared about them or respected them emerged as a significant positive factor in those who eventually self-actualized.

Keywords Abuse · Career self-actualization · Dabrowski, K. · Defining Issues Test (DIT) · Emotional development · Erikson, E. · Highly gifted adults · Kohlberg, L. · Maslow, A. · Moral development · Rest, J. · Self-actualization

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Does being smart necessarily lead to being emotionally mature and wise? This chapter describes an investigation of the possible connections between high intelligence and advanced emotional and moral development. By exploring environmental effects, we can consider how family, school and social background may contribute to growth toward self-actualization and advanced moral reasoning in gifted individuals.

The gifted tend to reach higher levels of moral reasoning at younger ages (Boehm 1962; Gross 1993; Janos et al. 1989; Kohlberg 1984). Does this early advantage translate into higher levels in gifted adults than average adults? Is high intelligence a conditional but not necessarily sufficient factor for higher level moral reasoning? Do some highly intelligent adults remain at a fairly low level of moral reasoning, and, if so, can we identify environmental, familial, or other personal factors associated with this outcome? Results clearly support the conclusions that high intelligence is no guarantee of advanced emotional and moral development, but when compared to typical adults, the highly intelligent reach both advanced emotional development (e.g., self-actualization) and advanced levels of moral reasoning (Ruf 1998).

20.1 Background to the Inquiry

The backgrounds of 41 highly gifted adults were explored in case studies through analysis of self-reported, anonymous questionnaire responses. The purpose was to gain a better understanding of how the treatment and attitude of highly gifted children by home, school, and community influence overall developmental outcomes. Individuals learn about themselves and their value, and develop their self-concept, through comparisons of themselves to others and from the feedback and nurturing they receive from others (Erikson 1968; Falk and Miller 1998; Festinger 1954; Greenspon 1998; Maslow 1970; Piechowski 1989).

The investigation centered on the subjects' perceptions of the *relevance* of background experiences related to their own sense of accomplishment, fulfillment and satisfaction with their adult lives. Themes emerged and formed a theoretical framework during the course of the data analysis. Common markers among subjects that might connect specific childhood circumstances to specific adult outcomes were tabulated.

20.2 Description of Subjects

A reasonable question arises: how representative of highly gifted people was the study's sample? It was clear from the case studies that the group represented considerable diversity of family composition, parenting styles, parental socio-economic background, educational type and quality, and adult career fields. The subjects originated from all over the United States, attended public and private rural, suburban,

and city schools, and came from families who had very little money or education to those who had much of both. All subjects were of western, middle, or eastern European, Caucasian ancestry, and two identified themselves as Jewish. The most consistent factor in the background of the subjects involved their educational experiences. The educational experiences did not appear to vary by geographic location; in fact, the biggest difference between rural and suburban schools was the degree to which the neighborhoods and communities knew the students and teachers.

Factors of age, intelligence and education were substantially reduced by the subject selection process. Though not required for inclusion, all subjects had at least undergraduate college degrees, and nearly all continued their intellectual stimulation through careers, continuing education, and reading. Nearly every subject listed reading first as a favorite pastime in both childhood and adulthood.

The subjects' career experiences varied considerably. Specifically, only one person had never done paid work outside the home; and there were two medical doctors, one small film maker, numerous university professors, psychologists, psychotherapists, attorneys, and engineers, several small business owners, two major business CEOs, and a number of social workers, writers, and classroom teachers. A great many of the subjects did much of their work alone. Interestingly, none of the subjects claimed management level work, although some were their own bosses.

Although 183 subjects volunteered to participate, the final selected participants were all within the 40- to 60-year-old age range to minimize generational cohort effects (Strauss and Howe 1991). The final subjects were not a randomized sample, and from the pool with completed author-designed inventories, an even number of males and females, and one transgendered subject, were selected. The case study content was not considered prior to selection. The self-reported IQ levels of the subjects – at least one 99th percentile score on a recognized nationally standardized test of ability – are equivalent to or higher than the mean of people in the professions. For elaboration on the subjects, the case studies and the methodology, see *Environmental, Familial, and Personal Factors That Affect the Self-Actualization of Highly Gifted Adults: Case Studies* (Ruf 1998). These data are derived from this study.

20.3 Brief Review of Self-actualization and Moral Development

Self-actualization basically means living up to one's potential. Although this research began with the view that "living up to one's potential" means that persons have achieved intellectual and career success while also achieving inner satisfaction and emotional well-being, it became apparent that some achieve inner satisfaction and a sense of emotional well-being *without* achieving overt career or financial success. Some attain career, intellectual, or financial success but never find a sense of inner satisfaction and emotional well-being.

Self-actualization is "high levels of responsibility, authenticity, reflective judgment, empathy for others, autonomy of thought and action, and self-awareness" (Nelson 1989, p. 8). Here, a distinction is made between two types:

1. Identity formation without going through a developmental crisis. “Successful” people – those who fulfill the role of good, law-abiding, and socially responsible members of their society – meet the traditional description of self-actualized individuals (Peck and Havighurst 1960; Piechowski 1989).
2. Those people who experience inner transformation after undergoing one or more developmental crises, “personal growth guided by powerful ideals ... moral questioning, existential concerns ... process by which a person finds an inner direction to his or her life and deliberately takes up the work of inner transformation” (Piechowski 1989, p. 89). They may or may not appear to be “successful” in a career or monetary sense.

Maslow (1970) emphasized the role of an individual’s own *perceptions* of the world and society. His theory focused on the emergence of self, the search for identity, and the individual’s relationships with others throughout life. “The highest and most evolved motive is self-actualization, a healthy desire to be the best one can be ... [the most self-actualized] were intent upon doing things to make a better world, they volunteered, tutored, and gave of themselves without much concern for financial gain” (Hall and Hansen 1997, p. 24). The following is a listing of Maslow’s characteristics of self-actualizers (derived from Turner and Helms 1986):

1. More efficient perception of reality
2. Acceptance of self and others
3. Spontaneity
4. Problem centering
5. Detachment
6. Autonomy
7. Continued freshness of appreciation
8. The mystic experience
9. Gemeinschaftsgefühl, (sympathy, compassion, identification with others)
10. Unique interpersonal relations
11. Democratic character structure
12. Discrimination between means and ends
13. Philosophical, unhostile sense of humor
14. Creativeness
15. Resistance to enculturation

An expansion on Erikson’s work pointed out that adolescents face four possible alternatives when solving the crisis of “who am I?” (Marcia, as cited in Woolfolk 1995; Scheidel and Marcia 1985):

The first is identity achievement. This means that after considering the realistic options, the individual has made choices and is pursuing them. It appears that few students achieve this status by the end of high school. Most are not firm in their choices for several more years; students who attend college may take a bit longer to decide (Archer 1982). Identity foreclosure describes the situation of adolescents who do not experiment with different identities or consider a range of options, but simply commit themselves to the goals, values, and lifestyles of others, usually their parents. Identity diffusion, on the other hand, occurs when individuals reach no conclusions about who they are or what they want to do with their lives; they have no firm direction. (p. 70)

Table 20.1 Erikson's developmental crises (From Lefton, 1994)

1. Basic trust versus mistrust	Birth to 12–18 months	Feeding	The infant must form a first, loving relationship with the caregiver or develop a sense of mistrust.
2. Autonomy versus shame/doubt	18 months to 3 years	Toilet training	The child's energies are directed toward the development of physical skills, including walking, grasping, controlling the sphincter. The child learns control but may develop doubt and shame if not handled well.
3. Initiative versus guilt	3–6 years	Independence	The child continues to become more assertive and to take more initiative but may be too forceful, which can lead to guilt feelings.
4. Industry versus inferiority	6–12 years	School	The child must deal with demands to learn new skills or risk a sense of inferiority, failure, and incompetence.
5. Identity versus role confusion	Adolescence	Peer relationships	The teenager must achieve identity in occupation, gender roles, politics, and religion.
6. Intimacy versus isolation	Young adulthood	Love relationships	The young adult must develop intimate relationships or suffer feelings of isolation.
7. Generativity versus stagnation	Middle adulthood	Parenting	Each adult must find some way to satisfy and support the next generation.
8. Ego integrity versus despair	Late adulthood	Reflection on and acceptance of one's life	The culmination is a sense of acceptance of oneself as one is and a sense of fulfillment.

Some people reach an alternative, moratorium, a form of break from the task of deciding who one really is and what one ought to do.

Table 20.1 lists Erikson's series of eight interdependent developmental crises that all individuals face. It provided a structure for evaluating what the subjects wrote in their author-designed Childhood and Adult Inventories. How each crisis is resolved has lasting effect on the person's self-image and view of society.

Further investigative structure is provided by the inclusion of Dabrowski's levels of emotional development. Although Dabrowski's levels are arranged hierarchically

as an emotional maturity progression, results indicate that low, medium, or high levels, *per se*, are not necessarily good or bad, better or worse. Dabrowski searched for the “authentically real, saturated with immutable values, those who represented ‘what ought to be’ against ‘what is’” (Dabrowski, as cited in Piechowski 1975, p. 234). He believed that some individuals are born with a higher ability to transcend life’s difficulties and evolve into mature, wise, “evolved” human beings than other people. Some people,

... could not reconcile themselves to concrete reality; instead, they clung to their creative visions of what ought to be. They searched for “a reality of a higher level. And often they were able to find it unaided” (Dabrowski, in Piechowski, p. 236). These clients experienced intense inner conflict, self-criticism, anxiety, and feelings of inferiority toward their own ideals... Dabrowski saw these ... symptoms as an inseparable part of the quest for higher level development. He fervently desired to convince the [medical] profession that inner conflict is a developmental rather than degenerative sign. (Silverman 1993, p. 11)

Dabrowski’s theory of positive disintegration proposed that advanced development requires a breakdown of existing psychological structures in order to form higher, more evolved structures (Silverman 1993, p. 11). In simpler terms, the house of cards that we build up during our youth to help us explain life no longer works for us. Some idea enters our consciousness and throws off all that we have believed. As we struggle with this new concept we can feel as though nothing makes sense anymore, and it can lead to a sense of helplessness or despair. That’s the *disintegration* part. The reason it is called *positive* is because it is actually a step toward maturity and a greater understanding of the world and our place in it. Dabrowski listed five fairly distinctive levels of emotional development. Table 20.2 describes characteristics and motivations of people at each level of emotional development. Theoretically, emotional growth beyond Level II is uncommon. Evidence exists that the advanced growth described by Dabrowski is probably not found in identity foreclosure or diffusion, is experienced only briefly in pre-mid-life identity achievement, and is probably present during a mid-life moratorium-type crisis. It is likely that few people experience their day-to-day lives in a fashion described by Dabrowski’s Levels III, IV, and V (Josselson 1991; Levinson 1978; Ruf 1998; Sheehy 1974).

“Dabrowski observed that the most gifted and creative individuals with whom he worked seemed to exhibit higher levels of empathy, sensitivity, moral responsibility, self-reflection, and autonomy of thought than the general population” (Nelson 1989, p. 5). Although the study results indicate that subjects exhibited a wide range of emotional maturity, almost all subjects in the study exhibited the majority of these qualities. One quality was more commonly exhibited by subjects in Dabrowski’s “advanced” levels of emotional maturity (See Table 20.2): autonomy of thought.

Until the late twentieth century, most considered moral reasoning a function of socialization rather than cognition. Many assumed “moral development was a matter of learning the norms of one’s culture, of accepting and internalizing them, and of behaving in conformity with them” (Rest and Narvaez 1994, p. 2). Kohlberg argued that conformity to social norms is sometimes morally wrong, as when dutiful soldiers commit atrocities.

Table 20.2 Moral and emotional development schemes

Kohlberg's levels of moral development	Approximate moral development levels by DIT P-score ^a	Dabrowski's levels of emotional development ^b
<p>Preconventional: (typically attainable between ages 7–11+)</p> <p>Stage 1 – Fear of punishment</p> <p>Stage 2 – Self-aggrandizement</p>	<p>Low: Subjects who are described as fitting the study's first levels of emotional development generally scored below 40 (the average score for American adults) on the DIT P-score. Table 20.5 details the stage scores attained by each subject on the DIT.</p>	<p>Level I: Self-interest, self-preservation (characterized by egocentrism, desire for material gains, goals of success, power, fame, competitive with others, external conflicts, little self-reflection, lack of empathy, rigid psychological structure.)</p>
<p>Conventional: (typically attainable between ages 11 to adult)</p> <p>Stage 3 – Desire for approval</p> <p>Stage 4 – Maintains social order</p>	<p>Medium: Scores between 40–65 were found among subjects who fit the study's description of conventional or stereotypical normal adult development. (57.67 is the average for the current study's subjects).</p>	<p>Level II: Stereotypical roles (highly influence by others, values introjected from parents, church, etc., relativistic, situational values, conflicted feelings, contradictory actions, desire for acceptance, feelings of inadequacy compared to others, lack of hierarchy of values.)</p>
<p>Postconventional (ages 21+, not typically attained by most adults)</p> <p>Stage 5 – Democratic values</p> <p>Stage 6 – Universal ethics</p> <p>Stage 7 – Cosmic consciousness</p>	<p>High: Scores of approximately 65 (the average score for moral philosophy and political science students is 65.2) and higher coincided with the study subjects whose viewpoints, as found in case study writing, corresponded most with high scorers on the DIT, moral philosophers.</p> <p>Theoretically, scores would close in on 100.</p>	<p>Level III: Personality transformation (inner conflict, hierarchy of values, positive maladjustments, inferiority toward one's ideals, feelings of guilt and shame, independent thinker, moral framework believed but inconsistently applied.)</p> <p>Level IV: Self-actualization (conscious direction of development, commitment to one's values, acceptance, objectivity, responsibility and service to others, philosophical, unhostile sense of humor.)</p> <p>Level V: Attainment of the personality ideal (inner peace and harmony, altruism, universal compassion, devotion to service).</p>

^aNorms from Rest and Narvaez 1994.^bFrom Piechowski and Silverman 1993.

Kohlberg focused on cognition – “the thinking process and the representations by which people construct reality and meaning” (Rest and Narvaez 1994, p. 3). He developed a stage theory that included preconventional, conventional, and post-conventional thinking (See Table 20.2). Kohlberg’s interest was to uncover major markers in life-span development. He assumed any measurement device would be accurate if people scored higher as they matured.

In early results from his assessment instrument, more men reached high conventional levels than women, and his longitudinal study involved only men. Gilligan (1982) interpreted the findings as indicative of a primary difference between the reasoning of men and women. She argued that Kohlberg’s higher levels depicted a progressive separation of the individual from other people, and that women come from an ethic of care, move from a focus on self-interests to a commitment to specific individuals and relationships, and then to the highest level of morality based on the principles of responsibility and care for all people.

“The stages do not depict the progressive separation and isolation of individuals from each other (as Gilligan said), but rather how each individual can become interconnected with other individuals” (Rest and Narvaez 1994, p. 8). Over time, research with Kohlberg’s theory shows women as a group score slightly higher than men on Kohlberg’s Moral Judgment Interview (Colby and Kohlberg 1987; Narvaez 1993). They also score higher on Rest’s *Defining Issues Test* (Rest 1986), a machine-scorable inventory based on Kohlberg’s moral reasoning stages.

The *Defining Issues Test* (DIT) was completed by all subjects in the Ruf (1998) study. Its *P*-score, for “principled” thinking, emerged as an important indicator of potential for more abstract, complex emotional reasoning. Use of the terms emotional growth and maturity does not imply good or bad, but instead indicates a propensity or openness to change, particularly *inner* change. Table 20.2 places Kohlberg’s moral development stages alongside Dabrowski’s emotional development levels. As the data analysis evolved, DIT scores were placed between the two other theorists, Kohlberg and Dabrowski, because it became clear they were all related. Subjects did not fall as perfectly into the depicted DIT score ranges and Dabrowski levels as the three column Table 20.3 would suggest; however, there were always at least some characteristics of the associated Dabrowski level that lined up next to the DIT score range.

Tables 20.3 and 20.4 add perspective to the discussions of DIT scores in relation to emotional change potential. Table 20.3 details the study group results. Table 20.4 lists specific group averages for the DIT accumulated from previous studies.

It is difficult to adequately define and describe the post-conventional levels of Kohlberg’s stages 5 and 6 because most people never attain that level of reasoning themselves. Research generally supports an assumption that the stages comprise a hierarchical structure where higher is better (Rest and Narvaez 1994; Rest et al. 1969; Walker et al. 1984). The tasks in these studies of the DIT involve asking subjects to paraphrase arguments from each of the stages. Subjects are always able to paraphrase levels lower but not above their own. Also, subjects can describe moral reasoning lower than their own level as immature, the way they once were, or simple-minded. The validity of a progressive stage theory is tested through

Table 20.3 Highly gifted study DIT summary (Derived from Ruf 1998)

Score statistics		Women's results	Men's results
Range	30–83.3	6 scored below the mean	13 scored below mean
Mean	57.67	13 scored above the mean	6 scored above the mean
Median	56.7		
Standard Deviation	13.78		

39 of 41 subjects had valid DIT *P*-scores (*P* = *principled*).

1 transgender male to female scored above the sample mean.

5 subjects scored below 40, the population average *P*-score for American adults (Rest and Narvaez 1994).

Table 20.4 Norms for selected groups on the DIT *P*-scores (Derived from Rest and Narvaez 1994)

65.2	Moral philosophy and political science graduate students
59.8	Liberal Protestant seminarians
52.2	Law students
50.2	Medical students
49.1	Practicing physicians
47.6	Dental students
46.3	Staff nurses
42.8	Graduate students in business
40.2	College senior business and education majors
41.6	Navy enlisted men
40.0	Adults in general
31.8	Senior high school students
23.5	Prison inmates
21.9	Junior high school students
18.9	Institutionalized delinquents

a series of tasks with volunteers who were asked to “fake bad” and “fake good” on the MJI or DIT. Subjects are able to fake bad because they understand the thinking that they have outgrown. They were unable to fake good (McGeorge 1975).

Past research on the Defining Issues Test has indicated that adults with low scores—or scores that do not continue to climb with age – lack intellectual stimulation in their lives. The factor most consistently found to correlate with DIT scores is years of education (Rest 1979). Nonetheless, a study on high achieving eighth graders (Narvaez 1993), showed that high achievement scores were necessary but not sufficient for high scores on the DIT. None of the low achievement scores were related to high DIT *P*-scores, but only some of the high achievement scores were. In other words, high ability to achieve in school is necessary but not enough for high DIT scores. Narvaez compared the eighth grade scores to college scores collected from a previous study and found that the highest DIT scores came from the identified high achievers from the eighth grade group, although the college men had the highest score average, followed by female eighth graders, then female college, and finally eighth grade males. The selection of highly gifted, well-educated,

middle-aged adults was purposeful for the Ruf study in that factors other than educational level might be more easily identified as contributors to moral reasoning growth.

Many agree that high giftedness manifests itself as a personality characteristic as much as it does a learning ability. Highly gifted people think more complexly, learn new material faster, and are generally more successful at training for and maintaining successful careers. Their high intelligence, however, does not make all gifted people more able than nongifted to solve their own emotional and social problems, as is amply borne out by analysis of this subject population. Furthermore, highly gifted people often experience considerable difficulty during their childhoods in finding compatible friendships and in developing a clear sense of who they are and how they fit in.

According to Rest (1986),

people who develop in moral judgment are those who love to learn, who seek new challenges, who enjoy intellectually stimulating environments, who are reflective . . . , who take responsibility for themselves and their environs . . . they have an advantage in receiving encouragement to continue their education and their development . . . they profit from stimulating and challenging environments, and from social milieus that support their work, interest them, and reward their accomplishments . . . are more fulfilled in their career aspirations, . . . take more interest in the larger societal issues. This pattern is one of general social/cognitive development. (p. 57)

20.4 Data Analysis: Primary Sorting Categories and Terminology

Categories that helped explain levels of adult success, happiness, satisfaction, and levels of inner development and were used as the primary sorting categories in the analysis of case study data are:

- Childhood abuse
- Tone
- Searcher, Nonsearcher, Neutral
- Counseling or therapy
- DIT *P*-score

Significant life issues such as childhood emotional or physical abuse, adult subject's religiosity, suicide, marriage, divorce, and sexual preference were compared to the subjects' levels of emotional development. There appeared to be a relationship between these encounters and factors with their eventual moral and emotional growth. Related to this is the analysis of subjects' perceptions of themselves based on feedback from other people. Themes emerged of confusing or hurtful feedback received during their school years, feedback related to their differentness as highly gifted, in developing their own sense of who they are and how they fit into the world.

It was initially theorized that subjects who experienced abuse would have more difficulty self-actualizing. Abuse refers to any treatment, as perceived and reported

by the study participants, which led them to be to feel unloved, or unworthy of love, respect, or admiration. Although some abuse is intentional, it need not be intentional to cause harm. The following description of abuse was used for case study analysis:

1. Physical – excessive punishment or rough physical treatment
2. Emotional – excessive criticism, lack of approval, parental temper tantrums or addiction problems, or words or behaviors that suggest the child is unliked or unwanted
3. Sexual – incest, rape, or exposing child to sex inappropriately
4. Spiritual – frightening or threatening God’s disapproval or punishment
5. Neglect – basic physical, emotional or attention needs not met
6. Ignorance – poor parental treatment due to lack of correct information

It became apparent that categorizing the case studies based on emotionally and sexually abusive versus nonabusive backgrounds still did not explain apparent differences in adult level happiness or self-actualization. Abuse also was not verifiable by the written case study approach, since some subjects described abusive circumstances but denied that they were abused. Other subjects realized their treatment was not optimal but did not feel damaged because they always felt loved and supported. Consequently, abuse as a category was assigned only when the subject stated clearly that he or she felt abused.

As it became evident that attitude might be more significant than actual presence or absence of abuse, a new sorting category was developed called Tone, “A particular mental state or disposition; spirit, character or tenor” (*Random House Unabridged Dictionary* 1987, p. 1994). The term conveys the presence or absence of satisfaction and contentment in each subject’s life. The following list explains how Tone Scores were assigned to the case study subjects:

- Tone 1: Subjects wrote that they are happy, content, satisfied; have a positive outlook.
- Tone 2: Same as Tone 1 but also revealed some sadness or disappointment.
- Tone 3: Not possible to discern subject’s tone or the subject seemed to be in emotional limbo, neither content nor particularly discontent.
- Tone 4: Wrote statements that they were not at all happy or content; filled with many unresolved feelings.
- Tone 5: Subjects wrote that they were very angry or resentful.

The next analysis stage was based on whether or not subjects mentioned receiving psychological therapy; it was possible that both DIT and Tone scores could be influenced by therapy. The data indicated that although counseling was associated with higher DIT scores, it did not seem to be associated with adult happiness to any strong degree. It became clear that the search for precursors to inner growth was not the same as the search for happy adults. When it became clear that abuse and therapy still did not identify the people whose complexity of viewpoint was higher level reasoning, an additional sorting category was invented and added: Searcher. Dabrowski’s description of “positive disintegration” was viewed as an indication of Searcher behavior.

- Searcher. Searchers are still actively deciding who they are and who they want to be; they tend to see many sides to many issues. Searchers examine and re-examine themselves, others, and issues and are open to changing their views if new, convincing information becomes available. Searchers may or may not be self-actualized in either their careers or intrapersonal (inner) lives. They may go through periods of emotional turmoil – “positive disintegrations” – as they strive, consciously or unconsciously, to reach their personality ideal, their best overall selves. (See Silverman 1989).
- Nonsearcher. Subjects do not report identity exploration as an active concern. Nonsearchers give evidence of either identity foreclosure or identity achievement, as described by Erikson (1968). Some nonsearchers are people who may be self-actualized in a career sense in that they are productive people who live and work at a high level, presumably up to their potential. This is not the same as the inner emotional maturity achieved after extensive identity exploration and adaptations. Other subjects described as nonsearchers say they are underachieving but accept the status quo.
- Neutral. Someone who is neither clearly a Searcher nor a Nonsearcher.

The final sorting category was the DIT *P*-score itself. It was initially assumed that all of the highly gifted subjects would score well above the population average of the DIT. As is evident from Table 20.5, the subjects' score range was quite wide despite their uniformly high intellectual and educational levels. Results showed a steady progression of DIT scores corresponding to the advancing complexity levels of moral and emotional reasoning of Kohlberg and Dabrowski. When case file analysis yielded a result that was out of synch with this fairly linear progression, the file was reviewed again to see if it was the DIT that missed the expected emotional level or the researcher. The difficulty was always related to the definition of the term Searcher. A final terminology distinction for clarifying this last issue was incorporated into the definition. Apparently “searching for answers” is not the same as being open to new information that can totally transform one's viewpoint. A Searcher continues to be open; someone who is not a Searcher will stop being open when the “answer” is found.

Subjects who gave evidence of being Searchers or Nonsearchers provided the most conspicuous factor for separating high emotional reasoning levels from the low. Positive disintegrations proved to be more difficult to count or verify; and there were some subjects who gave no detail describing positive disintegration-type episodes but who were still categorized at high emotional levels.

It appears that a DIT score below 65 indicates a person who is probably not a Searcher, although some scores above that level could only be categorized as Neutral. In line with the finding that Searchers are open to inner change, all of the subjects categorized as Searchers are placed at Dabrowski Level III or higher. There is also a consistent pattern in the DIT scores with low to high scores coinciding with the emotional development levels. The lowest DIT score received by a Searcher is 67.8.

All of the subjects who were categorized as Nonsearchers were placed in Levels I and II of Dabrowski's Levels of Emotional Development, and the highest DIT score

Table 20.5 Highly gifted subjects and factors related to emotional growth

Subject	Age	Dabrowski level	DIT	Tone	Abuse/therapy	Searcher
41F	58	I	*	4	Yes/yes	Non
12M	52	I	*	3	No/no	Non
26F	46	I	30.0	5	Yes/no	Non
30F	47	I	33.3	4	Yes/no	Non
10M	51	I	43.3	1	No/no	Non
27M	54	II	38.3	5	Yes/no	Non
14M	48	II	40.0	3	No/no	Non
28M	57	II	40.0	5	Yes/no	Non
13M	47	II	41.7	4	No/no	Non
31F	51	II	43.3	3	Yes/no	Non
11M	56	II	45.0	4	No/no	Non
29F	48	II	46.7	3	Yes/no	Non
15F	50	II	55.9	1	No/no	Non
25M	43	II	46.7	3	Yes/no	Neutral
22M	45	II	46.7	1	Yes/no	Neutral
6M	42	II	51.7	3	No/no	Neutral
8M	54	II	51.7	3	No/no	Neutral
9M	57	II	56.0	2	No/no	Neutral
23M	51	II	56.7	3	Yes/no	Neutral
39F	45	II	56.7	2	Yes/yes	Neutral
20M	54	II	58.3	4	Yes/no	Neutral
2F	44	II	61.7	1	No/no	Neutral
40F	46	II	61.7	3	Yes/yes	Neutral
3F	43	II	65.0	1	No/no	Neutral
21F	50	II/III	55.0	3	Yes/no	Neutral
37M	40	II/III	59.6	4	Yes/yes	Neutral
38F	49	II/III	64.4	4	Yes/yes	Neutral
1F	43	II/III	65.0	3	No/no	Neutral
36M	47	III	48.3	3	Yes/yes	Neutral
24M	46	III	70.0	4	Yes/no	Neutral
4M	47	III	75.0	4	No/no	Yes
18F	40	III	67.8	2	No/yes	Yes
7F	60	III/IV	65.0	4	No/no	Neutral
5M	46	III/IV	73.3	3	No/no	Yes
16M	40	III/IV	74.0	3	No/yes	Yes
32F	52	III/IV	70.0	1	Yes/yes	Yes
17F	44	IV	74.5	1	No/yes	Yes
35F	47	IV	71.7	2	Yes/yes	Yes
33F	45	IV/V	80.0	2	Yes/yes	Yes
19F	42	IV/V	82.0	1	Yes/no	Yes
34F/M	42	IV/V	83.3	1	Yes/yes	Yes

* stands for DIT results that were not considered valid (according to the scoring rules in the Manual).

among Nonsearchers was 55.9. There appeared to be two types of Nonsearchers. One type gave evidence of trying hard to be a good person by being hard-working, responsible, and nice. They generally sounded optimistic and earned Tone scores of 1, 2, and 3. They often stated directly or indirectly that they hoped their behaviors and attitudes and accomplishments would change those around them to be more accepting of and loving toward them. It was common for them to work hard on finding meaning and value in their lives through avenues others would find acceptable. The motivation seemed to come from a desire for love and approval. This first type of Nonsearcher often discovered fairly early in life how to formulate and meet goals, and once successful at meeting those goals, stayed with the original plan. Additionally, this first type of Nonsearcher usually found career and financial success.

The second type of Nonsearcher was the person who stated that life is the way it is, fine or otherwise, and there is no point in trying to change anything. These were the subjects who always had someone else or some circumstance to blame for their own short-comings or underachievement. Rather than being highly encouraged, motivated, or guided by outside people or institutions as described in Level II's stereotypical roles, these subjects already had all their own answers. This second type of Nonsearcher sounded angry, cynical, or negative and earned Tone scores of 3, 4, and 5. Deeper case study analysis indicated that people who hold on firmly to resentments and their own way of viewing life, whether it makes them happy or not, are highly resistant to positive disintegrations.

Table 20.5 lists the subjects by ascending DIT scores, apparent Dabrowski level, age at the time of DIT completion, Tone score, and whether or not they reported they were abused or received therapy. The right column lists whether the subjects appeared from their questionnaire responses to be Searchers, Neutral, or Nonsearchers.

20.5 Conclusions and Implications

20.5.1 *Who Becomes Self-actualized?*

The DIT was significantly correlated with Dabrowski levels in the study subjects at $r = 0.851$. Fully 44% of the subjects gave evidence that they had moved at least somewhat past the conventional developmental stage, the stage that is typical for most American adults. The corresponding DIT score was above 60 compared to the American adult average of 40, and well beyond where Maslow and Dabrowski proposed most people achieve. The attainment of self-actualization levels by nine of the study subjects, 22%, was above the average for an unselected, random population, and indicates that highly gifted, highly educated adults *do* more often reach higher levels of emotional and moral development than adults in general.

A subtle distinction between good behavior motivated by a need for approval and recognition and that which is intrinsically motivated was largely identifiable by DIT score ranges. The *career* self-actualizers had a number of identifiable characteris-

tics: products and accomplishments, awards and busy schedules. Career actualizers without inner transformation – the hallmark of higher, more open and complex, emotional levels – generally scored lower than the study group average, below about 60, on the DIT; and they also tended to be at the conventional or stereotypical stages of development. Their approach to making life choices and problem solving in general was captured by the terms “Nonsearcher” and “Neutral.” They wrote that they found satisfaction and happiness in their accomplishments and tended to recognize their worth as achievers and doers. A large number of subjects at this level of development received Tone scores of 1 and 2 and led very stable lives. So, even without inner transformation, these were people who appeared to “live up to their potential.”

Self-actualizers who have experienced inner, emotional growth tended to score higher than the study group average on the DIT. The case studies of the most satisfied and secure members gave descriptions of Dabrowski Levels IV or V thinking. All wrote they had not always been satisfied and secure, but that it was something they developed. High scores, generally scores over 65 on the DIT, appear to indicate a strong potential for the highest Dabrowski levels; high DIT scorers fit the category of Searchers. When unhappiness and depression were present in high DIT scorers, it generally indicated the subject had not achieved inner, emotional self-actualization but was actively struggling with it.

20.5.2 School and Community Environment

Of the three main topics investigated, school experiences were the most similar among subjects. Subjects who described problems with other students in school came from homes that were described as neglectful, hostile or rejecting. Several people described very negative experiences at school, but only one man and one woman wrote that they internalized the negative treatment and felt very bad about themselves. Both came from very negative home environments. The woman, #35F, eventually progressed emotionally away from the pain and bitterness of her past; the man, #27M, still had not. Not all students from troubled homes experienced difficulty with school friendships, however. Two subjects who came from rather positive homes, #3F and #5M, did well with other children but had some problems with teachers, both related to circumstances where the teachers apparently resented the student.

20.5.3 Family Environment

Although 56% of the subjects describe their own experiences in their childhood homes as emotionally abusive, only one subject reported that the abuse in her home drew attention from the authorities. Several cases included physical abuse.

The environmental and familial factors strongly affected the subjects' sense of self-worth and general happiness in their early years. The subjects who entered their middle years as the most emotionally miserable generally came from strongly emotionally abusive backgrounds where one or both parents were hostile and rejecting. Several subjects, most notably #16M and #18F, struggled with existentialist questions on their own despite generally supportive household environments. Of the subjects who eventually advanced to high emotional development levels, even those with background abuse, most could name at least one person who cared about them. Although a caring person from the past did not guarantee advanced emotional development, the *lack* of the subject's perception of a caring person was a common factor among all subjects who exhibited great hostility and received low Tone scores. Few subjects gave specific credit to any one person, group of people, or circumstances that gave them their sense of worth or happiness, although numerous people were credited with making the subject feel they must be worth *something*.

20.5.4 Personal Factors

The data in the study support a theory that there are both internal and external factors that lead to advanced levels of emotional and moral reasoning. Subjects who grew emotionally beyond the normal, conventional levels of most American adults described disappointment and confusion as precursors to their inner changes. Not all advanced emotional and moral reasoners experienced encouragement, and apparently part of their "Personality Transformation" included a new perspective on other people. Nearly all subjects described at Dabrowski Levels III/IV and above indicated good social/emotional intelligence that was deliberately and often painstakingly acquired later in life. One can argue that the self-actualized person exhibits the characteristic strengths and tendencies *after* achieving advanced emotional growth.

20.5.5 Career Success

The study subjects were selected for their intellectual level and age cohort rather than any personal eminence or unusual achievement. All younger than 60 years old, eminence could still be in the future for some. A definitive assessment of subjects "living up to their potential" was assessed primarily by whether or not the subjects themselves felt they were successful. Subjects who experienced educational and career success came from every type of parenting and every type of school and also fell into all levels of emotional development. To summarize, a career choice need not preclude inner growth, and a nurturing positive childhood does not appear to guarantee eventual inner growth.

Although all subjects in the present study who had *not* reached a recognizable degree of career success came from abusive backgrounds, there were many subjects categorized as abused who achieved career success. Subjects who fell into the low career success description were found at all emotional development levels. In other words, there were some formerly abused subjects who managed to grow and develop to higher emotional levels but who still were not obvious career achievers. From these particular examples, it can be concluded that career success and inner self-actualization are not highly related, yet neither are they exclusive to one another.

20.6 Some Limitations

A number of issues limit the general usefulness of the current study. Included among them are the imprecision of the case study analysis approach, the lack of agreement in the wider community regarding what constitutes giftedness, the snapshot approach to the subjects' assessments, the self-selection inherent in research with volunteer subjects, and lack of more than one rater for a number of highly subjective evaluations.

20.7 Why Inner Growth Matters: A Discussion

Two considerations stand out as important when one evaluates emotional self-actualization. First, people who have reached levels of self-actualization feel good about themselves, their lives, and the world around them. They are generally hopeful and have positive attitudes toward others. They are not generally depressed and they have a natural drive to contribute through their efforts.

As the analysis of the case study material progressed, it became evident that there is reason to consider advanced emotional and moral reasoning levels not necessarily better or desirable for everyone. Stage theory suggests that higher is better, but judging from the kinds of lives the different subjects are leading, and the happiness and contentment often reported by subjects at lower levels, it is important to keep an open mind about what advanced level emotional growth is and is not.

Only through future research can it be determined what personal, perhaps inherent, factors may contribute to eventual self-actualization in individual people. It is clear that there are identifiable characteristics present in people at different levels of development. How early they reach a level, and whether or not they will continue to progress to the highest stages, cannot be concluded from this study. Only one subject showed attitudes and behavior that differed significantly from his DIT results, subject #36M. He took a 2-year break before finishing the study and reported that he underwent significant internal changes. The questionnaire dealing with his

childhood was completed at the same time as his first DIT, on which he received a 48.3.¹ His clear change from probable Nonsearcher to Searcher by the time he completed the adult level inventory indicated that there are self-actualizers who did not begin life as natural Searchers. If they did not begin life, or even their adulthoods, as Searchers, that means something can happen to turn a person into a Searcher and increase the likelihood of self-actualization. What that something is did not become clear in this study.

In conclusion, the very nature of self-actualized growth and advanced moral reasoning may preclude either concept being understood well enough for teaching to children, young parents, or even teachers. Perhaps what parents, teachers, and children need to know is that there is the possibility of an emotional journey and it involves feelings of instability and struggle along the way. They can be taught what the typical milestones are, what their life goals may be, and the reasons for establishing those goals.

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¹ Subject #36M retook the DIT nearly 4 years after taking it the first time and after the body of this paper was completed. He scored 83.3.

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