

## Personality Development And the Gifted

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**A**FTER working with gifted children and adults for 20 years, I have come to the conclusion that most of them suffer from inferiority complexes. When I have tried to explain this observation to teachers, they have found it unbelievable. They all assumed that the brightest child in the class felt superior to everyone else. But the gifted child rarely compares himself with his classmates. Instead, he tends to think of what he knows in relation to what there is to know on any given subject, and finds himself lacking.

I have also observed heightened emotionality in gifted individuals. They experience life intensely, and their intensity often scares other people. They suffer their own inadequacies profoundly. They are easily wounded, highly self-critical, and over-reactive to the criticism of others. They are also sensitive to other people's feelings and show great capacity for compassion. Their perfectionism could easily take on the label "obsessive compulsive."

I have seen teachers and parents attempt to cure these children of their perfectionism. I've seen psychologists attempt to erase their obsessive compulsive tendencies. And I have seen gifted adults cry, "What's wrong with me? I see and feel things so differently from everyone else." I usually tell these people, "You're not sick, you're gifted!" Unfortunately, the emotional make-up of the gifted person has not been examined very closely. Myths of "emotional instability" still pervade people's thinking.

I was upset recently when I received a questionnaire from the Colorado Psychological Association listing every exceptionality in which a psychologist may specialize ... everything, that is, except giftedness. It was not recognized that the gifted have particular emotional needs which might require special knowledge.

That's why I was delighted to come across Dabrowski's Theory of Personality Development. It was developed after study of gifted, creative, and eminent individuals, and it placed a theoretical framework around my observations.

Dabrowski was a Polish psychiatrist and psychologist. He was deeply affected by the two world wars and the atrocities which surrounded him. He tried to comprehend how some people could be so inhuman and others could be so self-sacrificing. He concluded that these people could not all be made of the same cloth. Something had to be basically different in their psychological structures.

His theory divides humanity into five distinct levels of development. At the lowest level, the person has a very rigid psychological structure; Dabrowski called this the level of Primary Integration. Some people at

### **D**abrowski's theory divides humanity into five distinct levels.

this level are simply born without human feeling. They are the character disorder, or psychopathic, types. No one knows exactly what causes this phenomenon. Attempts to trace it to environmental variables have been unsuccessful. Others at this level are limited intellectually, so that they are unable to understand the complexities of other people's emotions. Perhaps the largest group at Level I are those whose environments have not been conducive to higher level development. These are the emotionally limited, self-protective individuals, whose own emotional needs have never been fulfilled. The characteristics of the Level I personality are egocentrism, absence of reflection, almost no inner conflicts, a tendency to blame others or a callousness toward other people. Some Level I's easily rise to power because they have no concerns about using other people toward their own ends. They experience no guilt.

At Level II, some of the rigidity of the psychological structure breaks down, but the person is left feeling confused and uncertain. People at Level II are very suscep-

tible to social pressure. Their main concern is "What will other people think of me?" They experience feelings of inferiority toward others and spend most of their time trying to get validation in the world. They vacillate between self-centeredness and concern about others' opinions of them. Their behavior is marked by capricious changes and inconsistency. They may be crowd followers. They may also be rebelling against the crowd, searching for their own identity. But "other people" loom large in their consciousness at all times.

Level III marks the transition to higher levels of development. It is called multilevel development. Dabrowski believed that lower and higher structures are incompatible and that the person must break down the less developed structure in order to develop the more evolved structure. This breakdown is nowhere more evident than in Level III.

Multilevel individuals become aware that there are higher values in the world, something more than just themselves. At first, they express dissatisfaction with themselves; they see "what ought to be" in themselves, and they are unhappy with "what is." They have a vision of perfection - moral perfection - and yet they are unable to achieve it. They become depressed, sometimes even despondent, at their own moral failure. An inner hierarchy of values is forming which was not present at Level II. At Level II, there were only other people's standards to determine right and wrong. And, since other people vary, standards were relative. But at Level III, an inner set of moral standards begins to evolve. And these standards may be at odds with the standards of others. When this happens, the person experiences what Dabrowski termed "positive maladjustment," being now adjusted to a higher personal moral order and maladjusted to the lesser standards of society.

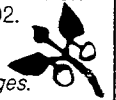
Individuals at Level III experience intense highs and lows reaching for higher realms and failing; they have much inner conflict, and they often fight for causes. They despise injustice and rebel against it. They have compassion for others, not just to prove how "good" they are, but because they identify with others and feel empathy toward them. I have seen many of these characteristics in gifted adolescents. Much of their passion and conflict is misunderstood.

At Level IV, there is more of a match between the person's ideals and his ability

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less of age, had similar overexcitability profiles. They were much higher in overexcitabilities than groups of average individuals with whom they were compared. The pattern we found in the first study of gifted adults appeared to be consistent across other gifted groups. The artists were significantly higher than all the other groups in emotional and imaginal overexcitabilities, confirming other biographical studies of this group, and they were higher than the graduate students in intellectual O/E, showing the relation between intellect and creativity.

Gifted education majors were significantly higher than chemical engineering and counseling psychology majors in most domains, and their profiles were very much like those of the gifted adult sample. This confirmed another suspicion I held that people who are drawn to study gifted children are themselves gifted. It has not been easy to convince these teachers of their own abilities, despite the evidence. But who else would relate well enough to the minds and the pain of gifted young people to be willing to devote their lives to serving them? Any teacher who is "addicted" to gifted kids has to be gifted.

In the past seven years, we have tested more than 600 gifted children at the Gifted Child Development Center. And we have been consistently struck with the emotional sensitivity of this group of children. We have seen sensitivity, intensity, and perfectionism show up so often on the parent questionnaires that when a child exhibits these three characteristics but does not come up with a score in the gifted range on the tests, we distrust the test results. I would have to say that at least 90 percent of these children show signs of emotional overexcitability.

Here are some typical examples taken

to live by those ideals. This commitment to one's own ideals, to one's integrity, is the *sine qua non* of Level IV development. Level IV's are considered self-actualizers. They exhibit most of the characteristics which Maslow outlined in his theory of self-actualization. They are compassionate, responsible, objective, autonomous. Their autonomy is not only from social opinion, but also from the lower levels of themselves. They are less likely to respond to situations with aggression, since that is a lower form.

Level V is the level of the attainment of the personality ideal. Dabrowski called it "Secondary Integration." This is the goal which the individual perceives when beginning the path to higher development. The characteristics are authenticity, harmony, communion with all living things, compassion. Few people attain it completely. Mother Teresa is considered a Level V being, and Dag Hammarskjöld was thought to have attained this level of development. Partial secondary integration is also possible, in which a person reorganizes a part of his or her personality to function at a higher level.

The process involved in the attainment of higher levels is difficult. It involves being willing to change one's personality to match one's inner ideals. It means fighting the lower drives in oneself. Not everyone is willing to make that journey. Also, there are limitations which prevent rapid advancement to the higher realms of functioning. A person may be hereditarily or environmentally limited.

## **V**ery few individuals become fully self-actualized.

Most people do not advance very far in the levels in their lifetimes. There appears to be a characteristic level at which the person functions consistently, although growth occurs within that level. Some people are in transition between two levels and are able to attain a higher level in their lives. Very few individuals become fully self-actualized, but they may become actualized in some area of their lives, a type of partial integration.

The main determinant of higher level development appears to be developmental potential. Dabrowski considered this to be an inborn function. Developmental poten-

tial involves the amount and intensity of overexcitabilities that an individual manifests. The overexcitabilities are heightened reactions to stimuli. There are five dimensions of overexcitability O/E: psychomotor, sensual, imaginal, intellectual, and emotional. Psychomotor O/E refers to excess energy, workaholism, nervous habits (such as tics and nailbiting), impulsive actions, and pressure for action. Sensual O/E includes responsiveness of the senses, love of music, aesthetic appreciation, sensualism. Intellectual O/E includes probing questions, theoretical thinking, moral thinking, reflectiveness, problem solving, interest in abstraction. Most gifted children have clear signs of intellectual O/E. Imaginal O/E is the capacity to visualize events very well, inventiveness, creativity, fantasy, and poetic, dramatic or artistic abilities. Emotional O/E involves intense connectedness with others, the ability to experience things deeply, fears of death, embarrassment and guilt, and emotional responsiveness.

If a child is born with a great many of these overexcitabilities, there is a greater chance that she might attain higher level development. But developmental potential is insufficient by itself. It must be actualized in a favorable environment. Environment can inhibit development considerably.

Our first attempt to research the theory asked the question of whether gifted individuals have higher developmental potential. To answer this question, in 1981, we sent a questionnaire designed to assess overexcitabilities to a group of Mensa members in Denver and to other gifted adults. The results were gratifying. We discovered that the gifted adults had higher degrees of overexcitability in all areas than a group of graduate students with whom they were compared. It was expected that they would be high in intellectual O/E, but the twin peak in emotional O/E was new information. It discredited the myth that Mensans are all intellect and no emotion, and it confirmed my observations of the emotionality of gifted individuals I had counseled. I could finally say that based upon research findings, gifted people are as different from others emotionally as they are cognitively.

Since that time, we have conducted a series of other studies with gifted adolescents and pre-adolescents, comparison groups of average students, creative artists, women in mid-life, and majors in counseling psychology, chemical engineering, and gifted education. All of the gifted groups, regard-

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from our parent questionnaires:

"B is a very sensitive child. Although not overly physically affectionate to many, his feelings for others are very deep - he feels hurt and pain when he feels he has displeased someone and also feels great pride, especially toward the achievements of his younger sibling." (Age 4)

"J is very sensitive to the needs of others and has compassion for people I don't see in many adults." (Age 4)

"R had early awareness and empathy with others' feelings. . . . She had amazing tolerance and emotionally is beyond her age. She wears her heart on her sleeve and is honest in her feelings with adults as well as with other children." (Age 4)

"K is very sensitive to the feelings and emotions of others. I have seen her ask her brother or even me if we have an 'owie'. She will show gentleness and give a hug. She is quiet, however, and tends to get her own feelings hurt." (Age 3 1/2)

"I first observed R's great sensitivity at the age of 5 1/2 months."

"M is a very loving and compassionate child. Cannot stand to hear a baby crying. Puts his hands over his ears if he hears anything too loud or too violent. His feelings are hurt in an instant. Concerned about the welfare of others. Very giving." (Age 3 3/4)

"A is a very sensitive child who is sensitive both to his feelings and other children's feelings. This was noted by his first pre-school teacher at the age of 2 1/2. This has led him to appear like a 'cry baby' at times." (Age 6)

"When J was 15 months old, his father had gall bladder surgery and I had to change bandages for a week or two after he got home from the hospital. About three weeks later, J noticed the scar, rubbed it gently, then ran off and searched for the correct bandage and placed it over the scar. He constantly surprises me like this."

"J is a very sensitive person. He gets his feelings hurt easily and doesn't like to hurt others' feelings. He realizes right from wrong and corrects others when he feels they are wrong." (Age 4)

"C is very sensitive to feelings and also to injustices - example is in the book *The Story of Babar*; when Babar's mother is killed he was very upset by the whole thing and asked questions about it for days. Also many other fairy tales take hours of explaining why and what's happening." (Age 4)

"K has a strong sense of what is fair play and will call someone on their behavior if she feels you are not being 'fair'. K is very hard on herself. She doesn't forgive herself easily if she has hurt someone's feelings or makes a mistake. . . . She has a special sensitivity rarely seen in other children her age. In her relationships with her playmates and animals, she is very kind. She enjoys 'helping' out at school or at home." (Age 4)

As is apparent from these examples, sensitivity, concern for justice, compassion, helpfulness, and awareness of others are characteristic of gifted children. What is remarkable is the age at which these traits appear. According to cognitive theories, young children are not capable of taking another's point of view. Most parents express the feeling that their children had "always been like this," confirming Dabrowski's hypothesis that emotional O/E is an inherent rather than learned trait in gifted children.

Dabrowski's theory is basically a theory of adult development. Yet, in our research with gifted pre-schoolers, pre-adolescents, and adolescents, the same patterns of overexcitabilities appear: high

## The gifted have high potential for reaching levels 3-5.

energy (psychomotor), aesthetic appreciation (sensual), creativity (imaginational), intellectual curiosity and concentration (intellectual), and sensitivity (emotional). The powerful combination of intellectual and emotional O/E appear to indicate that the gifted have high developmental potential for reaching levels III and above.

Dabrowski's theory offers a theoretical framework with which to understand the emotional makeup of the gifted. These children need support from parents and teachers to honor their feelings. Personal sensitivity is the root of compassion; perfectionism compels people to strive toward excellence and moral integrity; intensity gives rise to

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the willingness to fight for justice in adult life. These qualities are not to be "cured." They are to be celebrated as signs of potential for moral courage, responsibility, and humanitarian values. Our gifted children may be leading us toward a more humane society, one in which people respect and care about each other, and dedicate their lives to healing the suffering on this planet.

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