

# A Brief Overview of the Relevance of Dabrowski's Theory for the Gifted

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Kazimierz Dabrowski (1902–1980) advanced a theory of individual personality development based on a progression from an initial lower integration through a sequence of disintegrations, culminating in a higher integration.<sup>1</sup> Dabrowski called his work the theory of positive disintegration to reflect the central and positive role disintegration plays in development. He believed that some people are predisposed to experience life more intensely, and this predisposes them to frequent and severe crises. This heightened sensitivity is based on genetic characteristics Dabrowski called developmental potential. The presence of increased sensitivity combined with crises (disintegration) represents an increased opportunity to develop to advanced levels of personality.

In his research, Dabrowski found that gifted and creative people exhibit higher levels of developmental potential and therefore it is predicted that they will experience increased disintegration and personality growth. This is the basis of recent applications of the theory to the gifted.<sup>2</sup> This article discusses Dabrowski's basic ideas and applies his theory to the gifted.

## Dabrowski's Theory

Dabrowski observed that most people live their lives in a state of primitive integration guided by biological impulses (first factor) and/or by uncritical adherence to social convention (second factor). He called this initial integration level 1. Creative expression at level 1 is influenced and constrained by these two factors. The first factor channels giftedness and talents toward accomplishing self-serving goals. Often these talents are used in antisocial ways. For example, many criminals display this selfish creativity in the service of advancing their goals at the expense of others. The second factor constrains individual creativity by encouraging a group view of life and discouraging unique thought and expression. The second factor shapes creativity into forms that follow and support the existing social milieu.

Dabrowski also described a group of people who display an individualized developmental pathway. These people break away from an automatic, socialized view of life (which Dabrowski called negative adjustment) and move into a series of disintegrations. If development continues, people go

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on to develop an individualized, conscious and critically evaluated hierarchical value structure (called positive adjustment). The hierarchy of values acts as a benchmark by which all things are seen, and the higher values in the hierarchy direct behavior. These higher, individual values characterize a second integration reflecting individual autonomy. At this level, each person develops his or her own vision of how life ought to be. This higher level is associated with strong individual approaches to problem solving and creativity. Giftedness and creativity are applied in the service of these higher individual values and visions of how life could be. The person expresses his or her talents energetically through action, art, social change and so on.

Advanced development is often seen in people who exhibit strong developmental potential. Developmental potential represents a constellation of genetic features, expressed and mediated through environmental interaction, that consist of three major aspects: overexcitability (OE), specific abilities and talents, and a strong drive toward autonomous growth, a feature Dabrowski called the third factor.

The most evident and perhaps most fundamental aspect of developmental potential is overexcitability (OE), a heightened physiological experience of sensory stimuli resulting from increased neuronal sensitivities. The greater the OE, the more intense the sensory experience of life. In short, the person is more sensitive to experiences in life.

Dabrowski presented five forms of OE: psychomotor, sensual, imaginal, intellectual and emotional. These overexcitabilities, especially the last three, often cause a person to experience daily life more intensely and to feel the extremes of the joys and sorrows of life profoundly. Dabrowski found that heightened overexcitability in groups of gifted and creative people demonstrated their intense sensual experiences. Combined with imaginal and intellectual OE, sensual OE creates a rich source of

creative material. Additionally, psychomotor and emotional OE often provide strong stamina and motivation and are expressed in bouts of intense work and creativity.

Although based in the nervous system, overexcitabilities are expressed psychologically through the development of structures that reflect the emerging self. The most important of these conceptualizations are dynamisms: biological or mental forces that control behavior and its development. "Instincts, drives and intellectual processes combined with emotions are dynamisms" (Dabrowski 1972, 294). With advanced development, dynamisms increasingly reflect movement toward autonomy.

The second arm of developmental potential, specific abilities and talents, tends to serve the person's developmental level. As outlined, people at lower levels use talents to support egocentric goals or to climb the social and corporate ladders. At higher levels, specific talents and abilities become an important force as they are channeled by the person's value hierarchy into expressing and achieving the person's vision of his ideal personality and his view of how the world ought to be.

The third aspect of developmental potential, the third factor, is a drive toward individual growth and autonomy. The third factor is important in creativity for two reasons: first, it directs talents and creativity toward autonomous expression, and second, it provides motivation to strive for more—to try to imagine and achieve goals currently beyond one's grasp.

Dabrowski's theory presents five levels as shown in Table 1.

The first and fifth levels are characterized by psychological integration, harmony and little inner conflict. As outlined above, the first level is called primitive or primary integration. People at this level show either prominent first factor (heredity/impulse) and/or second factor (social environment). The majority of people at level 1 are integrated at the environmental or social level

(Dabrowski called them average people); however, many also exhibit shades of both impulse and socialization. Dabrowski distinguished the two subgroups of level 1 by degree: “the state of primary integration is a state contrary to mental health. A fairly high degree of primary integration is present in the average person; a very high degree of primary integration is present in the psychopath” (Dabrowski 1964, 121).<sup>3</sup>

Levels 2, 3 and 4 describe various levels and types of disintegration. The character of level 2 is reflected in its name: unilevel disintegration. The prominent feature of this level is an initial, brief and often intense crisis or series of crises. Crises are spontaneous and only occur on one level (and often involve only one dimension).

Unilevel disintegration occurs during developmental crises such as puberty or menopause, in periods of difficulty in handling some stressful external event, or under psychological and psychopathological conditions such as nervousness and psychoneurosis. Unilevel disintegration consists of processes on a single structural and emotional level; there is a prevalence of automatic dynamisms with only slight self-consciousness and self-control. (Dabrowski 1964, 6)

Conflicts on the same level (horizontal) produce ambitemperies and ambivalences: the person is pulled between different but equivalent choices (ambitemperies) and is not able to decide what to do (ambivalence). Ultimately, the person is thrust into an

**Table 1**  
**Dabrowski's Levels**

Level	Name	Factor	Key Features	Life View	Example
5	Secondary Integration	three	Harmonious autonomy, volitional behavior based on personality ideal. empathy, internal values	multilevel	Jesus, Buddha
4	Organized Multilevel Disintegration	three	Person takes control over crises and development	multilevel	A. Saint Exupery
3	Spontaneous Multilevel Disintegration	two /three	More and more aspects of life are called into question: dominos fall	transition	
2	Unilevel Disintegration	two	Distress: previous certainty of some important aspect of life begins to crumble	transition	Picasso, Sartre
1	Primitive (Primary) Integration	two	Harmonious, robotic, reflexive conformity to society's rules: external values, uncritically accepted	unilevel	average person
		one	Instinctual, selfish behavior—conformity feigned out of self-interest	unilevel	criminal

existential crisis: her social rationales no longer account for her experiences and there are no alternative explanations. During this phase, existential despair is the predominant emotion. The resolution of this phase begins as individually chosen values are integrated into a new hierarchy of personal values. These new values often conflict with the person's previous social values. Many of the status quo explanations for the "way things are," learned through education and from the social order, collapse under conscious, individual scrutiny. This causes more conflicts focused on the person's analysis of his or her own reactions to the world at large and of the behavior of others. Common behaviors and the ethics of the prevailing social order come to be seen as inadequate, wrong or hypocritical. Positive maladjustment prevails. For Dabrowski, these crises represent a strong potential for development toward personal growth and mental health. Using a positive definition, mental health reflects more than social conformity: it involves a careful, personal examination of the world and of one's values, leading to the development of an individual personality.

The expression of positive maladjustment can often be seen in both individual creativity and creative movements at this level. For example, Cubism and Dadaism, with their chaotic forms, are examples of creativity expressing positive maladjustment—the rejection and overthrow of the standard views of art and life.

Level 2 is a transitional period. Dabrowski said you either fall back, move ahead or end negatively, in suicide or psychosis. "Prolongation of unilevel disintegration often leads to reintegration on a lower level, to suicidal tendencies, or to psychosis" (Dabrowski 1964, 7).

The transition from level 2 to level 3 involves a fundamental shift that requires a phenomenal amount of energy. This period is the crossroads of development: from here one must either progress or regress. The struggle between Dabrowski's factors

reflects this transitional crisis: "Do I follow my instincts (first factor), my teachings (second factor) or my heart (third factor)?" The developmental answer is to transform one's lower instincts (automatic reactions like anger) into positive motivation, to resist rote and social answers, and to listen to one's inner sense of what one ought to do.

Level 3 describes the vertical conflicts caused by an involuntary perception of higher versus lower choices in life (because it is involuntary, Dabrowski called it spontaneous multilevel disintegration). Dabrowski called this vertical dimension multilevelness. Multilevelness is a gradual realization of the "possibility of the higher" (a phrase Dabrowski used frequently) and of the subsequent contrasts between the higher and the lower in life. These vertical comparisons often illustrate the lower, actual behavior of a person in contrast to higher, imagined ideals and alternative choices. When a person perceives the higher choice, it becomes obvious that this is the path to follow. When the person's actual behavior falls short of the ideal, disharmony and a drive to review and reconstruct one's life often follow. Multilevelness thus represents a new and powerful type of conflict, a conflict that is potentially developmental.

These vertical conflicts are critical in leading to autonomy and advanced personality growth. If the person is to achieve higher levels, the shift to multilevelness must occur. If a person does not have the developmental potential to move into a multilevel view, then he will fall back from the crises of level 2 to reintegrate at level 1.

In the shift to multilevelness, the horizontal unilevel, stimulus-response model of life is replaced by a vertical and hierarchical analysis. This vertical view becomes anchored by one's emerging individual value structure, and all events are seen in relation to personal ideals. These personal value ideals become the personality ideal: how the person wants to live his or her life. As events in life are seen in relation to this multilevel,

vertical view, it becomes impossible to support positions that favor the lower course when higher goals can be identified (or imagined).

In level 4 the person takes full control of his or her development. The involuntary spontaneous development of level 3 is replaced by a deliberate, conscious and self-directed review of life from the multilevel perspective. This level marks the emergence of the third factor, described by Dabrowski as an autonomous factor "of conscious choice (valuation) by which one affirms or rejects certain qualities in oneself and in one's environment" (Dabrowski 1972, 306). The person consciously reviews his or her existing belief system and tries to replace lower, automatic views and reactions with carefully thought-out, examined and chosen ideals. These new values will increasingly be reflected in the person's behavior. Behavior becomes less reactive, less automatic and more deliberate as behavioral choices fall under the influence of the person's higher, chosen ideals.

One's social orientation comes to reflect a deep responsibility based on both intellectual and emotional factors. At the highest levels, "individuals of this kind feel responsible for the realization of justice and for the protection of others against harm and injustice. Their feelings of responsibility extend almost to everything" (Dabrowski 1973, 97). This perspective results from seeing life in relation to one's hierarchy of values (the multilevel view) and the subsequent appreciation of the potential of how life could be, and ought to be, lived. One's disagreements with the (lower-level) world are expressed compassionately in doing what one can to help achieve the "ought."

Given their genuine (authentic) prosocial outlook, people achieving higher development also raise the level of their society. Prosocial here is not just support of the existing social order. If the social order is lower and you are adjusted to it, then you also reflect the lower (negative adjustment in Dabrowski's terms, a level 1 feature). Here,

prosocial is a genuine cultivation of social interactions based on higher values. These positions often conflict with the status quo of a lower society (positive maladjustment). In other words, to be maladjusted to a low-level society is a positive feature.

The fifth level displays an integrated and harmonious character, but one vastly different from that at the first level. At this highest level, one's behavior is guided by conscious, carefully weighed decisions based on an individualized and chosen hierarchy of personal values. Behavior conforms to this inner standard of how life ought to be lived and, thus, little inner conflict arises.

Creative expression and the accomplishments of the gifted find their most individual expression at levels 4 and 5. Especially at level 5, problem solving and art represent the highest and noblest features of human life. Art captures the innermost emotional states and is based on a deep empathy and understanding of the subject. Often, human suffering and sacrifice are the subjects of these works. Truly visionary works, works that are unique and novel, are created by people expressing a vision unrestrained by convention. Advances in society, through politics, philosophy and religion, are therefore commonly associated with strong individual creativity or accomplishments.

## **Applications of the Theory of Positive Disintegration**

The theory of positive disintegration (TPD) has an extremely broad scope and has implications for many areas. One central application applies to psychological and psychiatric diagnosis and treatment. Dabrowski advocated a comprehensive, multilevel diagnosis of the person's situation, including symptoms and developmental potentials. If the disintegration appears to fit into a developmental context, then the person is educated in the theory and encouraged to take a developmental view of his or her situation and experiences. Rather than being eliminated,

symptoms are reframed to yield insight and understanding into life and the person's unique situation. Dabrowski illustrated his theory through autobiographies of and biographies about those who have experienced positive disintegration, and he encouraged autobiography as a step in the process of autopsychotherapy. For Dabrowski, the goal of therapy is to eliminate the therapist by providing a context within which a person can understand and help herself. The gifted child, the suicidal teen or the troubled artist is often experiencing the features of TPD, and if they accept and understand the meaning of their feelings and crises, they can move ahead, not fall apart.

A second primary focus is on education, in particular the experience of creative or gifted students. Dabrowski hypothesized that these students will disproportionately show strong overexcitability and therefore will be prone to the disintegrative process.

### **Dabrowski and the Gifted Individual**

In an appendix to Dabrowski (1967), results of investigations done in 1962 with Polish youth are reported.<sup>4</sup> Specifically, "a group of gifted children and young people, aged 8 to 23" were examined (p. 251). Of the 80 youth studied, 30 were "intellectually gifted" and 50 were from "drama, ballet, and plastic art schools" (p. 251). Dabrowski found that every one of the children displayed overexcitability, "which constituted the foundation for the emergence of neurotic and psychoneurotic sets. Moreover it turned out that these children also showed sets of nervousness, neurosis, and psychoneurosis of various kinds and intensities, from light vegetative symptoms, or anxiety symptoms, to distinctly and highly intensive psychasthenic or hysterical sets" (p. 253). Dabrowski asked why these children should display such "states of nervousness or psychoneurosis" and suggested that it was due to the presence of OE (p. 255). "Probably

the cause is more than average sensitivity which not only permits one to achieve outstanding results in learning and work, but at the same time increases the number of points sensitive to all experiences that may accelerate anomalous reactions revealing themselves in psychoneurotic sets" (p. 255).

The association between OE and giftedness appears to be borne out in the research (Lysy and Piechowski 1983; Piechowski 1986; Piechowski and Miller 1995). It appears that at the least OE is a marker of potential for giftedness/creativity. Dabrowski's basic message is that the gifted will disproportionately display this process of positive disintegration and personality growth.

### **The Environment and the Gifted**

Today, the importance of the interaction of the individual with the environment is well recognized. "From infancy onwards, genetic individuality helps to steer the developing organism through the multitude of possible [environmental] experiences and choices" leading to a "nature via nurture" position (Bouchard et al. 1990). In this view, the dynamic interaction is an important factor, and the effect that the individual has on shaping his or her experience is recognized.

Dabrowski (1967, 12) suggested that "there are very few people among us who are consciously independent of the external environment." Most people generally take what the environment gives them for granted, and the interactive components play out their dynamics on an unconscious stage: Dabrowski's second factor. How we live largely depends on what happens to us, and our behavior is largely reactive and unconscious. Once positive disintegration begins, this changes. A person's "relation to his environment becomes more and more conscious, clear, and determined. He selects from it elements on which he places value. He becomes more independent," gradually moving toward the third factor (Dabrowski 1964, 61-62).

The presence of OE increases the significance of the role played by the person–environment interaction. As a person’s confidence in his developing personality becomes stronger, he comes to choose his environment more consciously, deciding what to respond to and how. Although rejection of unacceptable environmental features may cause further developmental conflict, it is also an important aspect of the emerging autonomous personality. As development proceeds, the environment shapes the person less and the person shapes the environment more.

Opinion on the ideal environment for the gifted is divided into two basic themes. One is a stress-free setting where things are as positive, accepting and easygoing as possible—the “bullish environment” (Sternberg and Lubart 1995). The other approach is called the “bearish environment” (Sternberg and Lubart 1995). Here, obstacles arise that challenge the person. Successfully mastering these obstacles strengthens the person’s character and abilities. Sternberg and Lubart review these positions and conclude that “it helps to have a generally favourable environment sprinkled with some obstacles along the way” (1995, 256). However, in Dabrowski’s theory, this dichotomy does not reflect the real complexity involved in understanding creativity. For Dabrowski, several critical elements are involved, including the physiological reaction of the person to the environment (OE), the dynamic interplay of the person with the environment, and any resultant conflicts and disintegrations that arise.

Dabrowski emphasized that the role of environmental events is most important when genetic dispositions are equivocal. When genetic potentials are strong, environment plays less of a role. Dabrowski said that “the worst environment will not stop the strongest genetics, the best environment cannot overcome the worst genetics” (Dabrowski, personal communication, 1978).

## **Developmental Potential: A Mixed Blessing?**

Dabrowski called OE “a tragic gift” to reflect that the road of the person with strong OE is not a smooth or easy one (M. Rankel, personal communication, April 6, 1996). Potentials to experience great highs are also potentials to experience great lows. Similarly, potentials to express great creativity hold the likelihood of experiencing a great deal of personal conflict and stress. This stress both drives development and is a result of developmental conflicts, both intrapsychic and social. Suicide is a significant risk in the acute phases of this stress. The isolation often experienced by these young people heightens the risk of self-harm.<sup>5</sup> Dabrowski advocated educating the person about OEs and the disintegrative process to give people a context within which to understand their intense feelings and needs. This context is a positive and developmental one. Dabrowski suggested giving people support in their efforts to develop and find their own self-expression. To be out of step is encouraged and seen as a feature of the overall developmental journey. Social maladjustment is also encouraged, particularly when it is positive and based on individually thought-out values. Young people who are seen as squares because they prefer to study instead of party are an example. Many of these children have to find and walk their own path, often at the expense of fitting in with their social peers and even their families.

Piechowski, and subsequently Silverman, have begun the process of measuring OE in the gifted.<sup>6</sup> These are important first steps in applying a Dabrowskian approach to the gifted. Other exciting avenues have begun, for example, efforts to counsel the gifted to help them see their overexcitabilities and disintegrations as positive features (Ogburn-Colangelo 1979).

## A Case Study

M —, a girl 10 years old of asthenic-schizothymic type, had marked mathematical and scientific abilities and was dutiful, with a tendency to be overly so. After good progress in one school she was moved to another, more extroverted system, where the teachers were prone to superficial appreciation of their students, basing their opinions on the pupil's boldness and originality.

M —, a rather shy girl with excessive inhibitions, withdrew from these new conditions and for several weeks showed both shyness and anxiety. She obtained marks that were fairly good, but much lower than in her former school. Her anxieties increased; she became resentful, slept badly, lost weight, and was either irritable or withdrawn.

After several months her marks improved, although she lost confidence in some of her teachers. When her parents discussed with her the possibility of moving to another class or another school, she replied: "It seems to me that in another class or school there will be similar teachers. I don't want to change. Always, only some of the teachers and some of the other students will like me. That's the way people are, and that's the way I am." In this case, disintegration occurred in an ambitious girl with a strong sense of justice, resulting in withdrawal and resentment. The fact that she did not wish to transfer to another class or school seems to be explained by emotional exhaustion and, at the same time, an increasingly realistic attitude toward the environment and patterns of interaction with it. This is a sign of partial, still insufficient, but clear rebuilding. Secondary integration is evident in M —'s new appreciation of herself and others but is still combined with a feeling of disappointment and a certain degree of compromise. (Dabrowski 1964, 105)

## Conclusion

It is beyond this article to explore Dabrowski's theory fully. The central point is that Dabrowski saw the gifted as a special subset of people, a subset prone to experience positive disintegration. This opportunity presents both creative possibilities and risks to the developing self. If the person fails to navigate these risks, a sad outcome of underachievement, addiction or suicide is possible. To avoid this, Dabrowski advocated a supportive and encouraging environment. Additionally, he suggested that the person be provided with the developmental context of positive disintegration. We cannot ease the experience of OEs or the pain of development. Still, we can and must give it context and shepherd our gifted youth through the height of their developmental crises. Individual creativity and expression of talent must be valued as expressions of higher personality development.

## Notes

1. Dabrowski's theory is presented in Dabrowski 1937, 1964, 1966, 1967, 1970, 1972, 1973 and 1996.

2. Recent applications to the gifted are represented by the following research: Brennan and Piechowski 1991; Lewis, Kitano and Lynch 1992; Miller, Silverman and Falk 1994; Piechowski 1974, 1975, 1978, 1979, 1986, 1989 and 1991; Piechowski and Colangelo 1984; Piechowski and Cunningham 1985; Piechowski and Miller 1995; Piechowski, Silverman and Falk 1985; Silverman 1983, 1986, 1989, 1991, 1993a, 1993b and 1994; Silverman and Schuppin 1989.

3. Dabrowski's description of level 1 as psychopathic reflects an earlier definition of the term: one that emphasized individual factors (genetic features as opposed to social factors) that act to impede a person's developmental course. This broad usage encompasses both malignant criminals and upstanding citizens who blindly and uncritically follow every social precept. This has created controversy and confusion in the theory as Dabrowski said that most of society's members live at level 1 (see Dabrowski 1964, 4–10). Other authors have introduced the term *robopath* to describe the unauthentic life based on robot-like reactions (Bertalanffy 1967; Yablonsky 1972). Bertalanffy (1967) was critical of psychology's approach to the human as a lab rat. He extended his

criticism to society and the structure of modern life that demands "reaching optimal psychosocial equilibrium by answering outside demands in reinforced responses" (p. 9). Bertalanffy lamented that people were losing their autonomy in a stimulus-response society, a society where one does not need to reflect or to think but merely to respond, a society geared to meeting external performance standards as measures of success. Yablonsky (1972, 7) uses the term *robopath* "to describe people whose pathology entails robot-like behavior and existence. Robopaths have what Kierkegaard called 'sickness unto death.'" Yablonsky says that robopaths are "socially dead" and function based on "pseudo-image." They are egocentric and lack compassion for others. "Their existential state is inhuman" (p. 7). Yablonsky elaborates how our modern society encourages "the emergence of robopathology." Also relevant is Rieber (1997) and his views on the "normalized psychopathy" of today's culture. These descriptions, especially Bertalanffy's and Rieber's, appear to apply to a person who follows precepts uncritically and who simply follows orders in living life—Dabrowski's idea of the second factor.

4. The appendix is titled "Personality, Outstanding Abilities and Psychoneurosis in Children and Young People."

5. Self-harm is a common feature of those with high developmental potential and the central risk during the height of developmental crises (Dabrowski 1937).

6. Recent research on measuring overexcitability includes Brennan and Piechowski 1991; Miller, Silverman and Falk 1994; Piechowski 1974, 1975, 1978, 1979, 1986, 1989, 1991; Piechowski and Colangelo 1984; Piechowski and Cunningham 1985; Piechowski and Miller 1995; Piechowski, Silverman and Falk 1985; Silverman 1983, 1986, 1989, 1991, 1993a, 1993b, 1994; Silverman and Schuppin 1989.

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