

The story of Dąbrowski in Edmonton  
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- 1). How I came to meet Dąbrowski: My personal experience, Bill Tillier.

In August 1976, I found myself standing for about an hour on the sidewalk between the pharmacy and educational psychology buildings at the University of Alberta. I had been accepted into pharmacy and also into a Master of Science program, and I had to decide by noon what I was going to do. As fate would have it, I chose the master's and proceeded to go register.

At 4:30 PM, I was standing next in line waiting to get my name on the last course I needed. I stepped forward to give the man at the desk my name and he said, "sorry we're done for the day." That meant I would have to come back the next morning (a drive of four hours back and forth). I was wearing an old army jacket, and I don't remember what I said, but the professor relented, and I got my card registered. Unbeknown to me, Marlene Rankel was sitting beside him, registering students for her courses. She put my name on one of her course cards.

Marlene apparently wanted to meet me and registered me in her undergraduate 469, developmental psychology course. When I saw this extra undergrad course, I was surprised, as I had already done a 400 level developmental psychology course in Calgary, but I went along, attending the first week and buying the textbook. The next week, I ended up saying to her that I had read the book and felt that I could not learn anything from the course. [At the time, I would not describe myself as arrogant, quite the opposite. I felt that I knew NOTHING, and I wanted to learn everything—right now—I was very impatient.] Marlene said okay, I'll move you into my 569 course, and I want you to read this book: She gave me *Psychoneuroses is not an illness*. Over that weekend, I read the book, and for the first time, I felt I had a context to understand my childhood. Of course, I was very excited. The next week I reported my experience to her, and she said Dąbrowski would arrive soon. Two weeks later, I met Dąbrowski at his first seminar for that semester.

Dąbrowski sought a base in Canada for his wife Eugenia, and his daughters, Joanna and Anna. In 1965 he received status as a visiting professor at the University of Alberta, Edmonton, and bought a house close to the University. He would walk (it was some 15 or 20 blocks away) rain, shine, or freezing cold. He had a chaotic schedule because he was also occasionally giving classes at Université Laval (Laval University), Québec City, and also spent about half of each year at his homes in Poland.

Tom Nelson, chairman, Department of Psychology, facilitated Dąbrowski coming to the University of Alberta, but, as far as I could see, Nelson did not seem enthused to have him associated with the Department of Psychology. Dąbrowski found his home at the Centre for

Advanced Theoretical Study in Psychology, which at the time was run by Joseph R. Royce, an expert in personality. Royce's assistant was Leo Mos. I think that the first thing that they did was to have Leo read Dąbrowski's 1964 book and have a panel interview videotaped, asking Dąbrowski questions for several hours (Leo had the longest and most intense academic exposure with Dąbrowski of anyone). In the videotaped sessions from the University of Alberta, Leo is on the far right; Dąbrowski is on the far left. I don't know any of these panel members (graduate students); they were all before my time.

I describe myself as Dąbrowski's last student in Edmonton because by the time I got there in 1976, Dexter Amend had already left as had Peter Jensen, Paul McGaffey, Earle Bain, Michael Piechowski, and Lynn Kealy. P. J. Reese had done the two Filmwest movies and moved on.

Dąbrowski gave a 600 level course for credit through the Theoretical Centre (where I took it) and had his office there. He also gave his informal seminars there every Monday night. Typically, 10 to 15 people would attend the seminars.

As far as I knew, Dąbrowski never ventured into the department of psychology and Nelson never attended his lectures. I think that Nelson had a role in arranging Dąbrowski going to Ponoka Alberta every Tuesday to see mental patients (there was a provincial mental health facility there; about an hour and a half south of Edmonton). This was something Dąbrowski insisted upon—he wanted to see patients, and this facility was featured in the film *Be Greeted Psychoneurotics*. (The young man being assessed by Dąbrowski at the beginning of this film was Peter, the subject of Marlene's n=1, PhD thesis. Sadly, Peter later committed suicide.)

Even at the Theoretical Centre, Dąbrowski's reception was not always positive. At one of Dąbrowski's seminars, after about 5 minutes, William Rozeboom, a permanent member of the Centre, stood up and said: "this is all Freudian bullshit" and stormed out.

Dąbrowski found a second source of support in Edmonton at the department of Educational Psychology. Bill Hague and Marlene Rankel were there, and they both had close involvement with Dąbrowski over the years. I also took a 583 course there in personality from Metro Gulutzan, a Russian expert on personality. I did a paper on Hans Eysenck's model of personality where I mentioned Dąbrowski, and Gulutzan knew of, and spoke highly of Dąbrowski.

I had the crazy idea of being a family therapist and ended up with a thesis advisor who had just written a book on family crisis (Jason Montgomery). I really wanted to look at TPD as an example of a systems theory; I was so impressed by the extraordinary book on systems by James Miller (1978). But I could not find a supervisor versed in systems theory, so, I thought I could look at family crisis using Dąbrowski. Montgomery handed me his book manuscript on family crisis, saying "this is what I'm going to submit have a look at it." Of course, overexcitability took over from common sense, and I wrote about a 10-page comment including the suggestion that we could "easily add a chapter on Dąbrowski that would strengthen the book." After I made my suggestions, he said to me: "it took me five f— years to write this book and I'm not going to change a single word of it." So that caused me a lot of conflicts with him, but Leo Mos was also on my thesis committee, and he kept things on track.

While I was in Edmonton, I also did a Bachelor of Education degree but, as it turned out, I got a job just as I was supposed to start my practicum teaching, and therefore I never convocated that degree. I left Edmonton in Spring 1980 but came back for the memorial conference that was held at the University of Alberta for Dąbrowski that fall. That was the first time I met Andrew Kawczak.

After Dąbrowski passed away, I received some 15 boxes of his materials from the University of Alberta that formed the basis of my modest Dąbrowski archive. In 1995, I created the website in its current form— <http://www.positivedisintegration.com/>. It was funny because the IT expert asked me about keywords, and we looked up Dąbrowski. The name literally did not appear so, at the time, we did not even bother using Kazimierz as a keyword. Of course, now thousands of hits occur on the name, and there are many different Kazimierz Dąbrowski's on the Internet.

[Aside: this is an issue for researchers to be aware of, for example, in Battaglia's (2002) biography she presented poems written by "Kazimierz Dąbrowski" that she found in the Auschwitz concentration camp archives. I confirmed with Joanna Dąbrowski that "our Dąbrowski" was never held in the concentration camp system.]

I went on to my career in forensic psychology but kept my Dąbrowski work as a hobby. [Of course, this job choice was unintended—I had never had a course in criminology or forensics—but it was a very good job with the federal government, so, I was learning on the job. And of course, the job had absolutely nothing to do with Dąbrowski].

During my time with Dąbrowski, the application of TPD to gifted was not a focus of discussion. In 1979, Michael Piechowski introduced the construct of overexcitabilities to the field of gifted education (Piechowski, 1979). Subsequently, from about 1980 to 1994, there were many workshops on TPD, most led by Michael. Linda Silverman, Frank Falk, Nancy Miller, and others learned TPD from Michael. Piechowski's contributions to the development of the overexcitability questionnaire have been the impetus for a great deal of research in the gifted field.

In 1994, I was asked by Sharon Lind to go to a conference in Keystone Colorado. Also invited to represent the "Edmonton students" were Bill and Rose Marie Hague, Dexter, Leo and Marlene. In addition to Michael being present, representing Michael's students were Linda Silverman, Cheryl Ackerman, Frank Falk and Nancy Miller. The Keystone seminar was set up to discuss the differences that had become apparent between the approach to the theory promoted by Michael and Dąbrowski's original framework. These differences had been highlighted by Norbert Duda when he attended many of these previous workshops.

Several important issues were delineated during the Keystone meeting. The hope when we left Keystone was that the two groups could exchange information and eventually bridge perspectives. This did not occur.

One problem with ongoing communication was I was the only one of the Edmonton group online so this made it difficult to exchange viewpoints.

[As an aside, Marlene and Leo and I flew to Denver and rented a car to go out to Keystone. Marlene did not want to fly and said she would only go if we all went together, so Leo drove her to Calgary and off we went. Neither Marlene nor Leo were good flyers. On the way back, Leo asked for one of those little bottles of alcohol, and we were all sitting in a row. About an hour and a half into the flight, I looked over and Leo had his eyes closed with the unopened bottle in his hand, and I commented to Marlene “oh look, Leo has fallen asleep.” Without moving, he replied, “I’m certainly not asleep!”]

At Keystone, it was suggested that we have meetings every two years, and we have done this. I put on the next conference in Kananaskis, Alberta in 1996. It was also suggested that the meetings alternate between Canada and the United States, and we have tried to achieve this balance, but it has been somewhat haphazard.

## 2). Michael Piechowski and Dąbrowski

Dr. Piechowski was a professor with the Department of Microbiology (UofA). He “started working with Dąbrowski in the winter of 1967,” becoming a “colleague.” (Piechowski, 2008, p. 41; Piechowski, Ramsahoye, Evans, & Czartoryski, 1970). In January 1970, Dr. Piechowski left Edmonton and went to Wisconsin to pursue a doctorate in counseling. There, he met Nick Colangelo and Kay Ogburn as fellow graduate students. Colangelo and Ron Zaffrann edited a book on counseling the gifted in 1979 (Colangelo & Zaffrann, 1979). It contained a chapter by Dr. Piechowski (1979a; see Piechowski, 2008, pp. 75-76). Dr. Piechowski became active in discussing TPD and the construct of overexcitability in the gifted field via workshops and publications (e.g. Piechowski, 1986).

From the beginning, Piechowski had strong opinions about Dąbrowski’s theory. For example, Piechowski did not endorse a genetic basis for developmental potential because he felt that everyone “ought to have equal potential to develop.” For some reason that remains elusive to me, Piechowski took the position Dąbrowski was essentially wrong on many points and took it upon himself to “correct the mistakes.” Conventionally, if Piechowski disagreed with Dąbrowski you would think he would simply publish his own thoughts under his name. This this did not happen. For over 20 years Piechowski gave seminars on Dabrowski’s theory and presented his own interpretations as if they were Dąbrowski’s positions. For example, Piechowski did not endorse the title “theory of positive disintegration” — in his seminars he referred to it as “Dabrowski’s theory of emotional development.” This created tremendous confusion because people do not know what was Piechowski versus Dabrowski’s original formulations. In turn, the literature in the gifted field on Dąbrowski is skewed because it almost exclusively relied on the disseminations presented by Piechowski. Many in the gifted learned the theory from Piechowski and, initially, I did not have permission to circulate the original materials of Dąbrowski’s works.

In Piechowski's dissemination he rarely spoke about positive disintegration and primarily focused only on overexcitability. He did not discuss Dąbrowski’s important construct of third factor, a feature that seems to me critical in the motivation of learning and self-development. Thus, the gifted literature on Dąbrowski reflects an almost exclusive emphasis on overexcitability without discussing the rest of the theory. In addition, the instruments that have

been used to measure overexcitability seem hopelessly invalid and reductionistic in consideration in comparison to the constructs Dąbrowski presented.

Piechowski has consistently resisted the idea that he has “a theory of his own” and suggests, as I have mentioned above, that he is “merely correcting the errors in Dąbrowski.” He has presented his ideas, most recently, in articles in *Roeper Review* that emphasize “rethinking” the theory (Piechowski, 2014, 2017). Mendaglio and I (2015) asked him to articulate his own theory and he responded (Piechowski, 2015).

### 3). What was Dąbrowski like?

One of the most difficult questions people ask me is what was Dąbrowski like? It is a difficult question for two reasons — first, it’s impossible to be objective because he had a major impact on me personally. Second, it seems difficult to put into words just what he was like — words seem to fail to capture the experience of knowing him.

He clearly was a unique individual, and I’ve never met anyone like him, before or since. He had a strange and powerful presence about him. You could feel when he was coming into the room before he got there. Being around him was a very calming experience. When he spoke to you, he gave you his full attention — it felt like no one else was in the room. He was not charismatic, he was unassuming and extremely humble. He never took “centre-stage” and certainly did not seek or like personal attention. He often said “this is not about me, it is about the theory.”

He clearly was unusually educated; he was well-versed in philosophy, psychology and psychiatry. In addition to Polish, he was fluent in German, Russian, French, and Spanish — he told me he learned Spanish to read Cervantes and Unamuno. English was his last language, but when I knew him, he was certainly clear and understandable. He was a musician who loved music, and he was well-versed in the arts. One of the people who came to the weekly seminars was a professional pianist who was an expert in J. S. Bach. I wish I could remember his name. He and Dąbrowski would often have animated technical conversations about Bach’s music that literally sounded like Greek!

During one conversation Dąbrowski asked me what my childhood was like, and I said full of overexcitability, anxiety, and angst. I mentioned that I still had strong anxiety, and he said “ah, yes but this is not so negative.” I remember the feeling that meeting him had somehow saved me and given me direction and focus in life. After one of our late-night seminars, I walked out with him, and I remember standing on the sidewalk on a cold but beautiful dark fall night, and he said to me: “you must take my theory and protect its meaning or it will die.” I certainly took this to heart, especially after I mentioned the incident to Marlene—I said, “of course he says this to all his students,” and Marlene said “no, I’ve never heard him say that to anyone.”

One of the strong impressions I had of him was that he was always in teaching mode. He did not have anyone who could help him advance the theory in Edmonton. For example, Thaddus Weckowicz had a similar background—he was Polish and a genius about Dąbrowski’s age and was also a psychiatrist and psychologist. But I think it’s fair to say by that time, Weckowicz was affected by his illness and was of no practical help to Dąbrowski. Likewise, Leo and Joe Royce

were prominent psychologists (especially Royce), but they were immersed in their jobs (although Leo came to every seminar). Michael was a microbiologist and had no background in psychology or psychiatry. Bill Hague was teaching full-time in educational psychology (and writing his two books), and Marlene, having recently graduated, was an assistant professor there. As I witnessed it, Dąbrowski was continually explaining and teaching his theory to those around him.

Anna and Joanna have continued to live in Alberta. By coincidence, Joanna became a psychologist. She and I had the same job with the Alberta government, me in Calgary and her in Edmonton. Over the years I have greatly appreciated her authenticity and our friendship and also the friendships of Leo, Dexter and Marlene.

#### 4). People I have mentioned:

Cheryl Ackerman: Cheryl did a PhD thesis looking at the OEQ (Ackerman, 1997b) and published an influential study (Ackerman, 1997a) that concluded that overexcitabilities could be used as an independent indicator of giftedness.

Dexter Amend: Early student of Dąbrowski's in Edmonton. He was listed as assistant on Volume 2 of the 1977 book. A "with" author on an unpublished manuscript with Dąbrowski (Dąbrowski, n.d.). Became a professor of psychology in Spokane where he lives with his family. See Amend (2008).

Earle Bain: Early student of Dąbrowski's in Edmonton. Wrote a thesis on the theory supervised by Bill Hague. Became a psychologist, based in Nova Scotia. Here is a link to the thesis: <https://era.library.ualberta.ca/items/350a25ae-4e9f-4750-ab46-e865163b7cf8>

Marjorie Battaglia: Presented a biography of Dąbrowski in her PhD thesis (2002).

Ludwig von Bertalanffy (1968) developed General Systems Theory (GST). He was critical of socialization (socialization creates "robopaths") and of psychology ("rat psychology") (Bertalanffy, 1967). This book created a philosophical atmosphere that made Dąbrowski's ideas naturally fit at the Theoretical Centre (see below). Bertalanffy was a co-founder of the Centre of Advanced Study in Theoretical Psychology at the University of Alberta.

Centre of Advanced Study in Theoretical Psychology: University of Alberta. Founded by Bertalanffy and a Norwegian philosopher by the name of Herman Tennessen. The Centre had about six permanent faculty as well as many visiting professors. Most at the Centre staff had dual appointments, in philosophy, psychology, or psychiatry. See Baerveldt, Shillabeer, and Richard, (2017); Mos and Kuiken, (1998).

Norbert Duda: Norbert was one of Dąbrowski's first students in Quebec. He went on to become a therapist in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida.

Frank Falk and Nancy Miller: Learned TPD from Piechowski. Quite involved in the research of testing overexcitabilities, helped develop the OEQ-II.

Metro Gulutzan: Professor in educational psychology, University of Alberta. An expert in personality. Very sadly, the year after I took his course, he and his wife were travelling back from Saskatchewan from visiting family and both were killed in a car accident.

W. J. (Bill) Hague: Bill was a Redemptorist Catholic priest. He had a serious stroke and eventually became a professor of educational psychology at the University of Alberta. His wife, Rose Marie had been a nun and, when I knew her, she was doing a Master's in Educational Psychology. Bill was quite interested in Kohlberg and looked at Dąbrowski in terms of moral development. Bill also suggested there could be another overexcitability called spiritual. Bill wrote two books (1986 and 1995). Bill and Rose Marie went on a trek to Tibet where Bill developed severe cerebral edema. He survived but with severe brain damage. They retired to British Columbia where Bill died in 2010.

Peter Jensen: Early student of Dąbrowski's in Edmonton. Went on to become a Canadian Olympic coach. He wrote a book on third factor (Jensen, 2009). Here is his website:  
<http://www.performancecoaching.ca/en/>

Lynn Kealy: Early student of Dąbrowski's in Edmonton. Became a psychotherapist in Calgary. Died of ALS.

Sharon Lind: From Kent Washington. Sharon was involved in the gifted area and, as I recall, also was a conference organizer. She organized the 1994 Keystone conference and also attended several other Dąbrowski conferences. She passed away in 2015.

Paul McGaffey: Early student of Dąbrowski's in Edmonton. Became a psychologist, now practices and northern Alberta. (see McGaffey, 2017).

Leendert (Leo) P. Mos: Leo had a triple appointment; professor of psychology, professor of linguistics, and initially, assistant director of the Theoretical Centre. When Royce died, Leo took over as Director (1979-1987) until funding closed the whole Centre (and he continued his other teaching). Edited a series of books on theoretical psychology—*Annals of Theoretical Psychology*, (see e.g., Mos, 1994; Staats, & Mos, 2012). Leo was a very serious academic and a genius. He lives in Edmonton.

Thomas M. Nelson: Chair of the psychology department, U of Alberta, between 1967 and 1985.

Michael Piechowski: In the winter of 1967, Michael Piechowski was a tenure track professor of microbiology at the University of Alberta in Edmonton. After serendipitously meeting Dąbrowski in Edmonton, he left his microbiology position to pursue becoming a counselor. In January 1970, Piechowski moved to Wisconsin to do a second PhD in counseling. During the 1970s, Piechowski continued to work with Dąbrowski on a book manuscript. When I was at the university, Michael had already left. I met him when he came to visit Edmonton at Christmas in 1977. He and I began a long correspondence by letter, and we had quite a number of personal visits and exchanges over the years as well.

Marlene Rankel: After meeting Dąbrowski, she became deeply involved and was essentially his personal assistant when he was in Edmonton. Marlene became a PhD student in educational psychology and went on to become an assistant professor there. She appears in the film *Be Greeted Psychoneurotics*. She was an assistant on Volume 2 of the 1977 book. Dąbrowski had published *Developmental psychotherapy* in Polish and translated it out loud himself, Marlene taking notes verbatim. Kawczak eventually compared the two manuscripts and found no translation changes necessary. Marlene is listed as co-author on this unpublished manuscript. She continued as a psychologist in Edmonton until her retirement. Her friends, Marie Laing and Cathie Burke often attended Dąbrowski seminars. Marlene developed a rapid onset dementia and passed away in 2017. (see e.g., Rankel, 1982, 2000, 2008).

P. J. Reese: Early admirer of Dąbrowski's in Edmonton. Made the two Filmwest movies on Dąbrowski. see <http://www.pjreece.ca>

Joseph R. Royce: Royce was an expert in factor analysis and its application to personality (Royce, 1964, 1983; Royce, & Powell, 1981, 1983). He was director of the Theoretical Centre from 1966 until 1979. He was very supportive of Dąbrowski. In 1979 he experienced blurry vision and was brain scanned using dye at the University Hospital. This induced a very serious stroke. His friend, the famous neurophysiologist, Karl Pribram (see: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karl\\_H.\\_Pribram](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karl_H._Pribram)), came to be with him for about a month, and Pribram prevented the University doctors from doing another scan. Sadly, Royce never recovered enough to work again, and Leo took over as director.

William Rozeboom: Published a paper that seemed to sum up his personal orientation: "Why I know so much more than you do" (1967) (see also Rozeboom, 1960, 1967).

Linda Silverman: She is a specialist in the gifted field and is based in Denver. Became very interested in Dąbrowski as applied to the gifted and has published extensively. See <http://www.gifteddevelopment.com/staff/linda-silverman> for more information.

Thaddus E. (Teddy) Weckowicz: (c. 1919-2000). Weckowicz was at the Theoretical Centre and was very supportive of Dąbrowski. He was a Polish professor of psychiatry and psychology and wrote two important works (1984, 1990). Sadly, he became mentally ill, and he committed suicide. I highly recommend his work. (see e.g., <http://positivedisintegration.com/Weckowicz1984.pdf>)

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