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The Sixth International Congress of the Institute for  
Positive Disintegration in Human Development

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**Developmental Potential:  
From Theory to Practice –  
Educational and Therapeutic Perspectives.**

## Developmental Potential.

- Dabrowski developed DP to help explain the different types and levels of both qualitative and quantitative personality development that he observed in people.
- Dabrowski (1972) described developmental potential as “the constitutional endowment which determines the character and the extent of mental growth possible for a given individual” (p. 293). [All highlighting in quotes is added.]
- A Platonic approach: not everyone has the endowment needed to proceed through all phases of development.
- DP encompasses a constellation of genetic factors, subsequent environmental interactions and finally, emergent and transcending properties that determine the developmental parameters for an individual.

## DP is the Cornerstone of the TPD.

- Dabrowski linked psychoneuroses with personality development because the developmental processes in psychoneurotics and in eminent personalities are similar:
  - “Clinical work and research . . . showed a great similarity in respect to the developmental potential of psychoneurotics and eminent personalities” (Dab. 1972, p. 180).
- In Dabrowski’s theory, personality development occurs through positive disintegration.
  - “Personality is thus the aim and the result of development through positive disintegration. The main agents of this development are the developmental potential, the conflicts with one's social milieu, and the autonomous factors (especially the third factor)” (Dab. 1972, p. 181).

## A Very Broad Approach.



Dabrowski includes many features under the concept of developmental potential.

## Three Critical Factors Anchor DP.

- “The first of these factors involves the hereditary, innate constitutional elements which are expressed in the developmental potential, in a more or less specific way, and are already recognizable in a one year old child” (Dab., 1970, p. 33).
- “Innate developmental potentials may be more general or more specific, more positive or more negative” (Dab., 1970, p. 33).
- First Factor, innate aspects, set the parameters:
  - “Environmental influences collide with those [innate] potentials, strengthen or weaken them, but their outcome always depends on an individual’s hereditary endowment” (Dab., 1970, p. 34).

## The Second Factor.

- The second factor is external or environmental influence. The interactive impact of the environment will depend on the strength and the character of the innate potential present:
  - “When the developmental potential is very strong and very rich even a negatively acting social milieu is of secondary importance. If the nuclei of the developmental potential are weak, or if they also contain some negative components then the character of the social milieu is of decisive significance” (Dab., 1972, p. 9).
  - [ Dabrowski used to say: “The best environment can’t help the worst genetics and the worst environment can’t stop the best genetics – we can see this everyday”.]

## The Third Factor.

- “The totality of the autonomous forces” (Dab., 1970, pp. 72-73).
- The Third Factor, helps a person to differentiate between developmentally positive and negative alternatives and to make developmental choices between “that which is more myself” versus “that which is less myself”.
- “The third factor is the dynamism of conscious choice (valuation) by which one affirms or rejects certain qualities in oneself and in one's environment” (Dab., 1972, p. 306).
- “The third factor strives to see that every concrete act of a given individual is in correlation with his personality ideal” (Dab., 1964, p. 61).
- With advanced development: “The activity of the third factor transcends the determining influences of heredity and of the environment as well” (Dab., 1972, p. 230).

## Dynamisms.

- Dabrowski described many types of developmental and creative dynamisms. Many of these dynamisms are critical aspects of developmental potential.
- Dabrowski (1972) defined a dynamism as:
  - A “biological or mental force controlling behavior and its development. Instincts, drives, and intellectual processes combined with emotions are dynamisms” (p. 294).
- Lower dynamisms are important at lower levels of development and higher dynamisms become important at higher levels of development.
- Dabrowski linked dynamisms and instincts directly with psychoneuroses and psychoneuroses directly with DP.

## Psychoneurotic Development.

- DP creates a positive context for crises and disintegration: “experiences of shock, stress and trauma, may accelerate development in individuals with innate potential for positive development” (Dab., 1970, p. 20).
- “These different forms of the psychoneurotic developmental potential constitute in their totality the ‘royal path’ of hierarchical development – through multilevel disintegration, inner conflicts, creative instinct and instinct of self-perfection – toward secondary integration” (Dab., 1972, pp. 10-11).
- “It is the task of therapy to convince the patient of the developmental potential that is contained in his psychoneurotic processes. ” (Dab., 1972, p. viii).

## Operational Definition of DP.

- “The developmental potential can be assessed on the basis of the following components: psychic overexcitability (q.v.), special abilities and talents, and autonomous factors (notably the *Third factor*)” (Dab., 1972, p. 293).
  - [psychic = mental]

## Overexcitability.

- “Each form of overexcitability points to a higher than average sensitivity of its receptors. As a result a person endowed with different forms of overexcitability reacts with surprise, puzzlement to many things, he collides with things, persons and events, which in turn brings him astonishment and disquietude” (Dab., 1972, p. 7).
- “The individual with a rich developmental potential rebels against the common determining factors in his external environment. He rebels against all that which is imposed on him against his will, against the typical influences of his environment, against the necessity of subordination to the laws of biology” (Dab., 1970, p. 32-33).

## A Paradigm Shift.

- Overexcitability changes how a person sees reality:
  - “One could say that one who manifests a given form of overexcitability, and especially one who manifests several forms of overexcitability, sees reality in a different, stronger and more multisided manner” (Dab., 1972, p. 7).
- The “new” **multilevel** view of life created by OE, sets the stage for the vertical conflicts that are the basis of positive disintegration, leading to the development of the individual’s hierarchy of values and subsequently, of his or her autonomy and personality ideal. This process culminates with the person creating his or her individual personality.

## Five Forms of Overexcitability.

- “One can already observe in a child one and a half to two years old certain fairly well differentiated potentials of the **developmental instinct**. These can be expressed through various differentiated forms of **psychic hyperexcitability** such as **sensual**, **psychomotor**, **emotional**, **imaginational** or **intellectual** hyperexcitability. ” (Dab., 1970, p. 31).
- The “big 3”:
  - “Some forms of overexcitability constitute a richer developmental potential than others. **Emotional** (affective), **imaginational** and **intellectual** overexcitability are the richer forms” (Dab., 1972, p. 7).

## OE and Creativity.

- “The truly creative mind in any field is no more than this: A human creature born abnormally, inhumanly sensitive. To them a touch is a blow, a sound is a noise, a misfortune is a tragedy, a joy is an ecstasy, a friend is a lover, a lover is a god, and failure is death. Add to this cruelly delicate organism the overpowering necessity to create, create, create – so that without the creating of music or poetry or books or buildings or something of meaning, their very breath is cut off . . . . They must create, must pour out creation. By some strange, unknown, inward urgency they are not really alive unless they are creating.” Pearl Buck.

## Measuring Overexcitability.

- Michael Piechowski developed a test to measure OE: The Overexcitability Questionnaire (OEQ).
- For the past ~25 years, research on OE has been done in the field of gifted education.
- Cheryl Ackerman's 1997 doctoral thesis summarized the research done using the OEQ. Research consistently found that emotional, intellectual and imaginational overexcitability (in various orders) are elevated in gifted groups with the highest scores seen in a group of artists.
- Recent efforts to measure overexcitability have been aimed at creating a new, more user friendly questionnaire: The Overexcitability Questionnaire Two.

## Where Are We Today?

- In the field of gifted education, overexcitability has become synonymous with developmental potential and for some authors, even synonymous with giftedness.
- Some authors have connected overexcitability (and giftedness) with attention deficit hyperactive disorder (ADHD), or even portrayed it as a learning disability.
- No one has attempted to measure the Third Factor or to integrate findings on overexcitability measures with the other developmental indices outlined in the Theory of Positive Disintegration.

## Discussion Point 1 – Theory.

- Perhaps it is time to return to Dabrowski's operational definition and to develop a measure of developmental potential reflecting and integrating; overexcitability, the Third factor and special abilities and talents.
- Measurements & discussions of developmental potential grounded within the Theory of Positive Disintegration would give readers a different and richer context to consider – a context that would also speak to applications.
- If we want to use a Dabrowskian perspective, we need to find better ways to integrate Dabrowski's overall approach into our research and applications, for example, in the field of gifted education.

## Discussion Point 2 – Therapy.

- Overexcitability causes mental conflicts. In experiences reminiscent of post traumatic stress reactions, people with strong overexcitability are often tormented by their experiences and are often left with troubling visual images replaying for years. The intensity and perseveration of these experiences combined with the inability to communicate them to others often leads to “tragic gifts” well after the “traumatic” experience.
- A Dabrowskian model calls for a more sensitive, more tolerant and more empathetic approach to counselling people who experience strong developmental potential. This model encourages the individual to embark on his or her own journey of autopsychotherapy.

## Discussion Point 3 – Education.

- Can we identify and address systemic attitudes and programs that suppress or extinguish developmental potential?
- Can we develop educational methods and programs that better tolerate and even enhance the expression of strong developmental potential when it is present?
- Can we develop educational or social programs to encourage the person with “average” or equivocal DP?
- Can we, as individuals, find ways to influence and enhance the developmental potential of our own society?

## Welcome to the Congress.

I would like to thank our congress coordinator:

**Ann Greenwood.**

On behalf of the **Congress committee**;

Dr. Sal Mendaglio, Dr. Mike Pyryt

and myself, Bill Tillier,

I welcome our keynote speaker, **Dr. A. Kawczak**,  
all of the other presenters and all of the participants.

**Dr. Marlene Rankel**, one of Dabrowski's colleagues  
and coauthors will now introduce

Dr. Kawczak.