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Conceptual differences between Piechowski and Dąbrowski

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Abstract

Beginning with his initial involvement and continuing over the past 30 years, Piechowski has presented a unique interpretation of Dąbrowski's theory of positive disintegration. Piechowski has not always clearly differentiated his interpretations from Dąbrowski's original positions, creating confusion. This presentation will highlight six primary conceptual differences and examples of conceptual confusion between the two authors. Awareness of these differences is critical for researchers in the gifted field who wish to study or apply Dąbrowski's approach.

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Conceptual differences between Piechowski and Dąbrowski

Dr. Piechowski met Dr. Dąbrowski at the University of Alberta in the winter of 1967 and soon resigned his position in the biology department to become Dąbrowski's student and eventually a research assistant, translator and co-author. In 1970, Piechowski returned to Wisconsin to pursue a doctorate degree in counseling and subsequently spent most of his career at Northland College in Ashland Wisconsin.

Another meeting, this time with Dr. Nick Colangelo, was again instrumental in Piechowski's career. Piechowski (1979) immediately saw an opportunity to apply Dąbrowski's concept of overexcitability in the gifted field, and over the next 30 years he actively disseminated his interpretation and emphasis of Dąbrowski's work within this community.

Conceptual differences emerged between Piechowski and Dąbrowski during their initial collaboration, and Piechowski's interpretation continues to evolve and diverge today. In his latest presentations to the gifted community, Piechowski has called for "rethinking Dąbrowski's theory."³ Unfortunately, until very recently⁴ the gifted community has not had the benefit of an adequate, comprehensive review of Dąbrowski's original theory. Rather than continue to enlarge a neo-Dąbrowski interpretation, I believe that both Piechowski and the gifted community would be better served if Piechowski would develop and publish his own theory, allowing his approach and Dąbrowski's original to be compared on their own merits. In the meantime, it is important that the differences between Piechowski's and Dąbrowski's approaches are understood, especially for those who are trying to study or apply Dąbrowski's work. This paper will highlight six key points of difference and confusion between the two authors.

³ For example, at the Annual Convention of the National Association for Gifted Children, held Oct 29 - Nov 2, 2008 in Tampa, Florida.

⁴ See Mendaglio (2008).

1). The titling and focus of the theory

Dąbrowski called his work the theory of positive disintegration to emphasize the necessary and vital role he saw for disintegration in personality development. From early days, the two authors disagreed on several issues including how to characterize the theory and over the years, Piechowski has primarily portrayed the work as a theory describing and measuring emotional development.⁵ The issue became a critical conflict between the two when Piechowski, while Dąbrowski was in Poland, was completing the final stages of publication of a collaborative work. Piechowski submitted revised titles emphasizing emotional development (Dąbrowski, 1977; Dąbrowski & Piechowski, 1977). When the book was published with these changes, Dąbrowski refused to acknowledge it and asked that the original manuscripts be republished, a goal that was not realized until 1996 (Dąbrowski, 1996; Dąbrowski & Piechowski, 1996).

Dąbrowski asked that Piechowski's revised title not be used because it reduced the scope of the theory. Dąbrowski emphasized to his students that he felt his theory of personality development went well beyond merely emotional development because it included a comprehensive theory and associated hypotheses accounting for the process through which individual, autonomous personality develops and emerges from the common elements of one's socialization. Positive disintegration spurred on by developmental potential is the key process initiating development which then must be followed by a careful review of one's character and history, finally leading to a volitional and conscious construction of a unique conceptualization of one's personality ideal. Advanced development consists of shaping the elements of one's personality and behavior to conform to this unique and individualized image of oneself. While

⁵ Here is Piechowski's clearest explanation: "It is not easy to classify Dąbrowski's theory. In the broadest sense, it is a theory of emotional development, but also about moral development and the springs of action or motivation, and it is also a theory of inner change in the core of the self" (Piechowski, 2003, p. 314).

emotion is a critical component of development, it is not emotion *per se* that is developing, it is personality.

The following chart shows key differences between the original manuscript titles and the titles as published.

- Volume 1 of the 1977 books:
 - Dąbrowski's original title:
 - *Multilevelness of emotional and instinctive functions. Part 1: Theory and description of levels of behavior.*
 - Piechowski's revision:
 - *Theory of levels of emotional development: Multilevelness and positive disintegration*

- Volume 2 of the 1977 books:
 - Dąbrowski's original title:
 - *Multilevelness of emotional and instinctive functions. Part 2: Types and Levels of Development.*
 - Piechowski's revision:
 - *Theory of levels of emotional development: From primary integration to self-actualization.*

Titling of the theory continues to be a confusing issue in the literature. For example, Sisk (2008, p. 26) refers to the theory using both titles: "Dąbrowski's . . . Theory of Positive Disintegration, also known as the Theory of Emotional Development." In yet another variation, Piechowski in recent lectures has used the title "Dąbrowski's theory of emotional development through positive disintegration."

Titling issues, along with Piechowski's dissemination over the years, have created a substantially different understanding of Dąbrowski's theory within the gifted community. Piechowski described and emphasized Dąbrowski's idea of overexcitability almost exclusively. Dąbrowski's emphasis on personality development and the critical roles played by positive disintegration and psychoneuroses have been lost. Instead, Dąbrowski's theory has been portrayed in the gifted literature as a theory of emotional development, a theory of giftedness

and/ or of creativity and a theory of moral development in gifted individuals. Although these themes represent legitimate applications, they do not reflect the broad scope of Dąbrowski's overall approach, described above.

The narrowed focus in the gifted literature has two major implications: first that the broader aspects of Dąbrowski's theory (like positive disintegration and psychoneuroses) have seldom been discussed or researched in the gifted context and second, overexcitability has been described as a unitary concept without the benefit of understanding its dynamics within its original context.

2). General confusion over the levels

A major aspect of Dąbrowski's theory is the description of levels of functioning, yet Piechowski's descriptions promulgate confusion within the gifted literature about the nature of the levels. At the Fifth International Congress on the theory held in Ft. Lauderdale in 2002, Piechowski said that discussion of Dąbrowski's theory should be confined to levels III, IV and V, as levels I and II are not associated directly with development *per se* and are therefore irrelevant. In Piechowski's opinion, little significant inner life exists at Levels I (primary integration) and II (unilevel disintegration); inner psychic life only begins at Level III with multilevel processes of introspection, self-examination, and self-evaluation (Piechowski, 2008, p. 43). Piechowski also emphasized the difficulty in measuring these first two levels: "Levels I and II are difficult to assess, because most of the dynamisms are at higher levels. In addition, Level I is defined by a total absence of any developmental dynamisms, and the absence of something is difficult to quantify" (Piechowski, 2008, p. 72). Thus, development begins at Level III with the inner psychic milieu and its creative and transforming dynamisms and with multilevel disintegration (Piechowski, 2008, p. 43).

Removing these levels from consideration is a substantial deviation from Dąbrowski's theory. It also raises the subsequent question, "what *do* levels I and II represent and how then should we deal with them?"

3). The nature of level I

Dąbrowski said that lacking strong developmental potential, the "so called normal person" (about 65% of the population) is limited to Level I (primary integration) or to the borderline of Level I – II. Dąbrowski emphasized that at this level, the average person is heavily influenced by his or her social environment and does not display a unique personality *per se*. Strong genetic influences may either keep a person at this level or promote opportunities for his or her disintegration and subsequent development.

Piechowski has rejected Dąbrowski's view of level I, and instead he concluded that the whole concept of primary integration should be reconsidered – "as it is neither primary nor a personality structure but the outcome of the way society is" (Piechowski, 2008, p. 76). The whole premise of Dąbrowski's theory is that, as he observed it, human behavior and development must be differentiated into two basic levels– lower, unilevel development versus higher, multilevel development – what Dąbrowski called secondary integration. Dąbrowski's distinction forms the basis of his fundamental concept of multilevelness along with the idea that this initial primary integration reflects a socialized conceptualization of the self that is inferior to the more advanced and authentic development of a unique, individualized personality displayed in secondary integration. If, as Piechowski believes, level I is not primary in relation to advanced development, what does Level I represent and how could we then reconcile this new view with Dąbrowski's approach? Again, a reformulation of level I represents another major conceptual departure from Dąbrowski's original theory.

4). The nature of level II

Dąbrowski named level II to reflect its basic characteristic – unilevel disintegration, a disintegration characterized by brief and often intense crises between equivalent alternatives, for example, trying to decide between buying a Chrysler, Ford or General Motors vehicle. Because the alternatives are essentially equivalent, the individual has a difficult time in choosing and tends to be ambivalent and display ambitemendencies – tendencies to choose one and then the other alternative. Dąbrowski stressed the transitional and intense nature of level II crises when he said “Prolongation of unilevel disintegration often leads to reintegration on a lower level, to suicidal tendencies, or to psychosis” (Dąbrowski, 1964, p. 7). Unless a reintegration back into Level I occurs or there is further development and transcendence into Level III, an individual chronically at Level II risks finding him or herself in “a trap of a rapidly growing mental tension” – a drama “without exit” (Dąbrowski, 1970, p. 135). According to Dąbrowski, about 20% of people are represented by level II (Rankel, 2008).

Based largely upon Piechowski presentations, the gifted literature has generally associated level II with a type of integration reflecting socialization and has not mentioned or, at least, not emphasized disintegration. The goal of level II has been presented as socialization (Silverman, 1993, p. 14).

Part of the confusion in conceptualizing level II may reflect Piechowski’s application of Dąbrowski’s factors of development. Dąbrowski described three such factors—heredity, the environment, and a third factor emphasizing a drive toward autonomy. In Dąbrowski’s approach, level I was primarily characterized by the influence of the second factor and to a lesser extent, the first factor. He applied the third factor to level III and above. Piechowski associated level I

with the influence of the first factor, level II with the second factor⁶, and level III and above with the third factor. Thus, following Piechowski's approach, it would be natural to see level I as a small group of people who were primarily influenced by primitive genetic instincts, and people who were in level II as the predominant social group encompassing the "everyday individual," primarily influenced by socialization and social mores.

Piechowski's interpretation of level II may also be summarized by his recent explanation that "Level II is not always characterized by disintegration, because it carries the possibility of partial integration, or adaptive integration, that follows the conventions and dictates of society and one's immediate environment" (Piechowski, 2008, p. 69). Again, this differs substantially from the emphasis Dąbrowski placed on level II as being a transitional level characterized primarily by unilevel disintegration.

5). The role of developmental potential

Dąbrowski defined developmental potential as a genetic feature: "The constitutional endowment which determines the character and the extent of mental growth possible for a given individual" (Dąbrowski, 1972, p. 293). For Dąbrowski, development, like many other psychological attributes (for example, intelligence), was primarily genetically determined. Strong developmental potential could not be stymied, while weak development potential could not be bolstered. Only when developmental potential is genetically equivocal does environment become the critical determining factor.

Piechowski rejected this viewpoint, saying: "Although Dąbrowski viewed primary integration as a rigid [genetic] personality structure, it makes more sense to see it as the outcome

⁶ For example: "[At level II] the self derives its definition from fulfilling the expectations of others, family, or society ('second factor')" (Piechowski, 2003, p. 289).

of socialization. *If people are operating at Level I it is because this is the condition of the world, not because their psyche is constituted that way*” (italics in original) (Piechowski, 2003, p. 289).

Piechowski now describes two developmental courses. First, following Dąbrowski’s approach, Piechowski accepts Dąbrowski’s idea that developmental potential is required for growth and that in many cases there is not sufficient potential for advanced development. Piechowski equated personal growth with climbing a mountain, stating that “not everyone has the strength, endurance, and determination to go far; few manage to reach the summit” (Piechowski, 2008, p. 64). Emphasizing the fact that not everyone appears to have significant developmental potential, Piechowski (2008, p. 64) continued “Also, not everyone is interested in climbing and may prefer to remain in the valley. Some may not even be aware of the mountain. The endowment for how far in scaling the figurative mountain an individual can go constitutes developmental potential.”

In a second approach, Piechowski presents a new conceptualization of development – a route he called “unilevel development” occurring in cases he observed at level II. Piechowski concluded these cases represent significant growth and raise “the question as to whether it is possible to facilitate a transition to multilevel emotional growth if a person’s developmental potential is limited.” Piechowski’s examples from level II “show that not all material has to be generated from the framework of Dąbrowski’s theory” (Piechowski, 2008, p. 72).

In summary, Piechowski described two developmental processes, one reflecting Dąbrowski’s traditional approach, governed and limited by the genetically determined expression of developmental potential, and a second path not constrained by limited developmental potential and “not generated from Dąbrowski’s theory.”

A fundamental plank in Dabrowski's theory, mentioned above, is his contrast between multilevel versus unilevel phenomena and behavior. For Dąbrowski, this multilevel view of reality is a critical and necessary part of advanced development and of secondary integration. Piechowski's approach to development now questions the role of multilevel development saying: "and is it possible to imagine a harmonious society without a multilevel majority? I feel it is possible – to imagine" (Piechowski, 2008, p. 72).

Piechowski's position raises several important questions that need more conceptual development, especially to differentiate development that is governed by developmental potential versus development that is unconstrained by such potential. What, more specifically, is Piechowski's philosophical approach to development? If the goal of social development is not a multilevel majority, what is it and what is the goal of individual development if it is not a multilevel perception of reality? Finally, what factors influence one's potential for growth under Piechowski's model?

In contrast to Piechowski's approach, Dąbrowski emphasized that the goal of individual development is a multilevel perception that differentiates the authentic individual from individuals who display a unilevel perception. Dabrowski described a number of individuals whom he believed represented secondary integration – people he thought heralded the next step in human evolution and who serve as role models as to what is possible, challenging us to take control of our lives and to strive toward higher ideals and growth over simple adherence to social norms and externally derived values. Again in contrast to Piechowski's suggestion that society may not require a multilevel majority, Dąbrowski emphasized the critical role played by multilevelness in advancing society's development and said that today, society is "sick" because it is composed of unilevel individuals and based upon unilevel principles, reflecting self-centered

and self-serving values and motives (Dąbrowski, 1970). Dąbrowski's ideal society functions upon multilevel principles and reflects other-centered motives – a society composed of multilevel individuals.

In conclusion, Piechowski's approach to developmental potential and the developmental importance of multilevelness appears to substantially differ from Dąbrowski's original conceptualization.

6). The role of self-actualization in development

Early on, Piechowski disagreed with Dąbrowski on the role of self-actualization in the theory. Piechowski inserted a long essay on self-actualization (SA) into volume 2 of the 1977 book as it went to press (later also published as Piechowski, 1978). In this addition, Piechowski equated self-actualization with level IV saying: "We shall try to demonstrate that Maslow's concept of SA fits the structure of Level IV and that, consequently, the traits of SA logically follow from that structure" (Dąbrowski & Piechowski, 1977, pp. 158-159). "Self-actualization, as a psychological norm suggested by Maslow, now finds support in the framework of the theory of positive disintegration as an attribute of the Level IV structure" (Dąbrowski & Piechowski, 1977, pp. 218-219). "In level IV, we have an explicit and detailed developmental structure which accounts for the pervasiveness and the cohesion of the traits of SA" (Piechowski, 1978, p. 230). Piechowski (1978, p. 229) elaborated "The correspondence between Saint Exupéry's material and SA and between the terms of SA and the terms of positive disintegration shows that the structure of level IV underlies all of the characteristics of SA." Piechowski continues to stress this relationship: "The fit between Level IV as the structural skeleton and self-actualization as the flesh of rich description with which to cover the bones is too good not to be true" (Piechowski, 2008, p. 58). Thus, over the last 30 years, Piechowski has consistently linked self-

actualization with level IV.

Piechowski has also equated self-actualization with level V. Piechowski's subtitle for volume 2 (Dąbrowski & Piechowski, 1977) was "from primary integration to self-actualization," implying that SA is the endpoint of development – level V in Dąbrowski's theory. In 1991, Piechowski explained that "Maslow's self-actualizing person fits Level IV; the self-actualized person – the enlightened one – fits Level V." "The early stages of self-actualization" . . . "correspond to Level III growth processes" (Piechowski, 1991, p. 20).

Dąbrowski's view differed. Although Dąbrowski and Maslow knew and admired each other and were correspondents, they disagreed on several points. Dąbrowski viewed Maslow's approach as only representing the beginnings of multilevelness (Dąbrowski & Piechowski, 1996). Dąbrowski believed that humans must consciously and volitionally overcome their lower animal instincts in order to achieve authentic development. Maslow, in contrast, emphasized that an individual must accept and actualize all levels of his or her nature: "The first and most obvious level of acceptance is at the so-called animal level. Those self-actualizing people tend to be good animals, hearty in their appetites and enjoying themselves without regret or shame or apology" (Maslow, 1970, p. 156). Self-actualizing individuals "display the clearest animal naturalness," welcoming these lower levels without question, accepting "the work of nature rather than to argue with her for not having constructed things to a different pattern" (Maslow, 1970, p. 156).

Maslow believed that man's instincts reflect a single biological continuum encompassing both the lowest animalistic traits and the highest human values; "the 'higher' life" "is the same *kind* or *quality* of thing" as the lower life – the animal life (Maslow, 1971/1976, pp. 313-314). For Maslow, there was no qualitative differentiation between animal instincts and the highest

values and metaneeds of humans. In addition, Maslow (1970) emphasized that an individual ought *not* try to achieve more, lest he or she simply become frustrated or feel guilty over failure to achieve ideals. Potential must be actualized as it exists – we must go from where we are to “what we can be,” but no further. For Dąbrowski, to develop one’s personality is to inhibit and transform one’s lower instincts – it is *overcoming* our animal nature that differentiates humans. Dąbrowski described the process of personality shaping – transcending the “is” of one’s existing self in order to move toward one’s personality ideal, the most unique and highest expression of one’s autonomy that can be imagined.

Dąbrowski said that equating self-actualization with his theory would diminish his approach. As Maslow used the term, and as it was generally understood, it was at odds with Dąbrowski’s approach. In addition, Maslow’s general approach to development differed significantly from Dąbrowski’s. For example, Maslow conceived psychoneurotic symptoms “in negative terms as being marginal to normal development”, whereas Dąbrowski viewed psychoneuroses as a necessary and integral part of personality development (Dąbrowski, 1972, p. 248). Finally, Dąbrowski’s theory went well beyond Maslow’s conceptualization of development and motivation. In particular, the third factor, the inner psychic milieu, the hierarchy of values, the personality ideal and finally, the roles played by psychoneuroses, positive disintegration and overexcitability in development could not be simply subsumed under either Maslow’s theory or under the label of self-actualization.

Summary

This paper has reviewed several key conceptual differences and issues of confusion between Piechowski’s interpretation and Dąbrowski’s original theory. Because these differences have influenced the subsequent literature and have not been clearly noted or delineated, some

confusion exists about Dąbrowski's original position. It is critical that researchers, students, and practitioners who wish to understand and apply Dąbrowski's approach be aware of these differences. Piechowski's contributions have been important, but they must be clearly differentiated from Dąbrowski's original approach. As mentioned above, Piechowski recently advocated for a "rethinking" of Dąbrowski's theory. A superior solution would be for Piechowski to develop and present his own theory, which he then could compare and contrast with Dąbrowski's original theory of positive disintegration.

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