

# News in Educational Psychology

## Levels of Personality Development

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*Dabrowski's Theory of Emotional Development provides a basis for understanding potential for higher level development in gifted children and adults.*

*Dabrowski proposed five levels of development, each with a unique personality organization. In this article, a new coding system for assessing levels is presented, based on categories that reflect feelings toward values, self and others. Examples from actual data are provided to illustrate these categories. The results of a study to test the reliability of this coding system are discussed, along with implications for counseling gifted adolescents, based on this model.*

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Where does moral leadership come from? Do gifted individuals have a greater capacity to develop humanitarian values? Answers to these questions were sought by Kazimierz Dabrowski (1902-1980), a Polish psychiatrist and psychologist, who studied gifted, creative, and eminent individuals. Dabrowski formulated his theory to describe the unique developmental patterns he saw in society's most talented members. Central to the theory is the concept of the breakdown (disintegration) of lower level, egocentric concerns in the service of the formation of higher level, altruistic values. Dabrowski's theory provides a means of conceptualizing the highest forms of human functioning — lives that are enriched with compassion, responsibility, authenticity, autonomy, and integrity.

In the past few years, several articles on Dabrowski's theory have appeared in the pages of *Roeper Review* (Gallagher, 1985; Piechowski 1986; Schiever, 1985) and elsewhere (Piechowski & Colangelo, 1984; Piechowski, Silverman, & Falk, 1985; Silverman, 1983). These articles have focused primarily on one aspect of the theory: overexcitabilities and their relation to giftedness, creativity, and developmental potential. Dabrowski (1972) observed that gifted children exhibit stronger responses to stimuli in five domains — emotional, intellectual, imaginal, sensual, and psychomotor. He hypothesized that these high-powered response patterns were innate, and that high intensity, frequency and duration of these elements indicated greater developmental potential than the norm.

It is clear that awareness of the overexcitabilities is important to our understanding of the heightened intellectual curiosity, sensitivity, imagination, sensuality, and energy possessed by gifted and creative children and adults. However, this is only part of the significance of overexcitabilities to overall personality development. An essential ingredient in the picture is still missing; without an understanding of levels of personality development, the concept of "developmental potential" is bereft of meaning. Potential for what?

In the most recent article on Dabrowski's theory, Piechowski (1986) laid

the groundwork for a more complete understanding of the theory. In addition to discussing the relation between overexcitabilities and giftedness, Piechowski briefly outlined the five levels of development, provided material on two cases of higher level development — Eleanor Roosevelt and Dag Hammarskjöld, and summarized the empirical studies to date on developmental potential in adults and adolescents.

The purpose of this article is to extend the information on Dabrowski's levels of emotional development and describe a new coding system for the assessment of levels based on an individual's values, self-concerns, and relationships with others. The theory has implications for the way in which we define and identify giftedness, the means by which creativity can be nurtured, our understanding of the intensity of the emotional makeup of gifted and creative persons, and the study of higher level moral development.

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### Dabrowski's Theory of Emotional Development

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Dabrowski's theory is distinct from other theories in its focus on the individual's emotional life. It shares some principles in common with other developmental theories, such as that development proceeds from lower to higher levels of functioning, that it involves structural transformation, and that it follows an invariant sequence. There are, however, some major differences. Since developmental theories originated with the study of children, most describe a natural progression related to age, and so continue throughout adult life, with age-related stages of adulthood similar to stages of childhood (e.g., young adulthood, midlife, etc.). Dabrowski described adult development, but he did not feel that age was a central factor.

Another major departure from other theories is the manner in which development is viewed. Many theorists hypothesize that higher stages of development are an outgrowth of lower ones and that the lower stages are incorporated into the higher, more integrated ones. In Dabrowski's theory, the struc-

tures of higher level functioning evolve separately and in opposition with lower forms. (See Figure 1.) The emergence of a higher level requires the dissolution of a lower one. Inner conflict between the lower (egocentric) and higher (altruistic) structures propels the individual toward higher level development. As the more evolved psychic structure gains strength in the personality, the lower, less evolved structure loses its power. Progression to higher levels is painful and arduous, making it the exception, rather than the rule. This theory is particularly applicable to the gifted because it describes extraordinary development in exceptional individuals.

A third significant difference between this theory and others is that Dabrowski attempted to describe the very highest form of human potential — a kind of advanced development attained by only a handful of individuals. This realm of development represents the ideal and makes comprehensible the struggles of those who can envision this potentiality. This highest level goes well beyond Maslow's (1962) level of self-actualization; Kohlberg's (1964) Stage 6, (Universal Ethical Principles); and Loevinger's (1976) Stage 6, (Integrated Personality) to mention but a few contemporary theories.

In Dabrowski's theory development from one level to another represents a whole internal reorganization of the personality. The developmental process occurs as one set of cognitive-emotional structures is replaced by another set. The individual's motivation, attitudes, and orientation towards others are noticeably altered (Piechowski, 1975). The lowest and the highest levels represent an integrated personality while the three intermediary levels are forms of disintegration in which there is internal conflict. Internal conflict is viewed as positive because it causes the individual to engage in self-reflection and, thereby, acts as a stimulus for development.

The five levels of human functioning described by Dabrowski's theory are characterized by egocentrism at Level I, ambivalence and self-doubt at Level II, self-examination at Level III, self-actualization at Level IV, and attainment of the personality ideal at Level V. Each level is described as a qualitatively distinct developmental structure; that is, the organization of the personality is uniquely different at each level of development (Piechowski, 1975). Most of society functions at Levels I and II. They are either at the mercy of their own appetites or dominated by

the attitudes of those around them. Self-determination does not begin until the third level, when the individual gains a glimpse of the personality ideal and begins the painful process of transformation.

### Levels of Development

**Level I:** Personality structure is integrated and rigid at Level I. The individual's orientation is external, and extrinsic rules of conduct guide behavior. All conflicts between the individual and others are externalized. Internal conflict is noticeably absent. For example, fault and blame are directed outside the individual, never perceived within oneself.

Attachments to others are based on the satisfaction of one's own desires, i.e. recognition, ambition, advantage, power. Emotional relationships are shallow with others being treated as objects or as a means to satisfying one's own needs. Superficial group feelings are common but alliances change easily. Response patterns are automatic, the result of basic egotistical needs and drives.

**Level II:** At Level II conflicts between basic motivational patterns and various experiences lead to a loosening of the primary structure. As disharmony within the individual increases, sensitivity to internal stimuli (one's feelings and attitudes) can lead to a breakdown of the primary structure. At this level individuals experience "vague feelings of disquietude, ambivalence, ambivalencies, and various forms of disharmony" (Dabrowski, 1970, p. 21-22). Their attitudes and behavior continually vacillate, and they appear to have no clear direction or criteria for choices.

**Level III:** When the individual begins to experience conflicts between different levels of thinking, feeling, and acting (i.e. higher versus lower), spontaneous multilevel disintegration begins. These conflicts concern what is morally good, just, and valuable. Within individuals at level III, there is an emerging sense of a hierarchy of values and personal goals. Individuals begin to experience the difference between the way they respond to self and others and the way they want to respond according to their own internal standards. Their behavior is guided more by autonomously developed principles of morality than by external standards.

Instead of the Level II horizontal conflict between equally acceptable personality characteristics, the struggle is vertical; that is, between the high moral standards to which the individual strives and the now unacceptable characteristics of the past.

This struggle often brings about dismay, anxiety, and intense internal conflict for individuals when they fall short of their own expectations.

**Level IV:** At Level IV there is "deliberate organization of a new harmonious (personality) structure" (Kawczak, 1970, p. 4). Individuals chart the course of their own development. Higher and lower features in the self and in the environment are set apart. Positive, higher moral and social goals are consciously chosen. Self-direction of one's development is based on universal moral values. Inner conflict subsides. The guiding principles of behavior are concern for others and the perfection of one's self or ego.

Personality characteristics at Level IV have been shown to correspond to those Maslow described in self-actualizing individuals, i.e. autonomy and superior perception of reality; problem centeredness; spontaneity; empathy, concern, and helpfulness toward others; feeling of kinship with all people; and compassion for humankind (Piechowski and Tyska, 1982).

**Level V:** Like Level I, personality structure at Level V is integrated, but responses are no longer automatic. They are controlled and directed toward the full development of the personality. As inner conflict disappears, the individual experiences the feeling of inner harmony and communion with all living things. Self-perfection based on the highest moral values is the goal. Others are related to with respect for their individuality and development. There is profound empathy for others and a constant willingness to help. "Those who achieve (this level) epitomize universal compassion and self-sacrifice" (Piechowski, 1975, p. 262).

The many factors considered essential for development in Dabrowski's theory can be grouped in three categories: (a) those related to heredity, described as "innate constitutional characteristics and potentialities; (Piechowski, 1975, p. 252); (b) those related to the social environment; and (c) those related to autonomous processes which include self-awareness, self-control, and the self-determining of one's values. With regard to heredity, Dabrowski posited the view that individuals are endowed with different emotional capacities just as they are with different intellectual abilities and that "the emotional sphere at every level of development is the decisive factor that determines and controls human activity" (Dabrowski, 1970, p. 112).

The heightened emotional response of an individual may be directed into one

or more of five different areas: (a) psychomotor (pressure for action), (b) sensual (sensate pleasures), (c) imaginal (active imagination), (d) intellectual (moral and intellectual pursuits), and (e) emotional (intense connectedness with others). These intensified emotional responses are labeled overexcitabilities. Individuals with greater emotional capacities will exhibit stronger responses to emotional stimuli.

To elaborate on the second category, the social environment, Dabrowski observed that very strong emotional experiences seem to propel individuals toward higher levels of development — particularly those with high developmental potential. Because he felt negative or unpleasant emotional experiences had been overlooked or misunderstood, Dabrowski emphasized the importance of these experiences in the “growth of sensitivity to other people and to one’s own development” (1970, p. 36). Loss, conflict, and stress in one’s social environment often act as stimuli for new attitudes, interests, aspirations, and ways of thinking. Dabrowski did not, however, negate the importance of positive emotional experiences, such as those of great joy and happiness.

The third category, the autonomous aspect, is the conscious self-direction of the individual toward his or her own development. It represents responsibility exercised for one’s own emotional and moral development. It is the degree to which individuals focus their own development toward the pursuit of higher, more universal values. Similar conceptions can be found in several other humanistic theories (Silverman, 1983).

### Measuring Levels

**E**mpirical testing of Dabrowski’s theory began in 1969 at the University of Alberta. The methods utilized were neurological examinations, clinical interviews, extensive autobiographies, written responses to 12 emotionally - laden verbal stimuli and the Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale. Following this beginning an open-ended questionnaire, called the Definition-Response Instrument (DRI), was developed by Gage, Morse, and Piechowski (1981). The DRI consists of six descriptive statements designed to focus respondents’ attention on the following themes: (a) susceptibility to the influence of others, (b) internal conflict, (c) inferiority, (d) dissatisfaction, (e) self-observation, and (f) personality ideal. Item 6 from the DRI

serves as an exemplar:

Think of your “ideal self” and those qualities which you think are best for an ideal life. What attributes have you most dreamed of having?

**R**espondents are asked to describe personal experiences which relate to each statement. Responses are content analyzed to assess developmental level. The internal consistency of DRI items has been found to be .71 (Miller, 1985).

Researchers using the DRI have reported an interrater reliability ranging from .67 (Beach, 1980) to .77 (Lysy, 1979) using Pearson’s *r*. A construct validation of Dabrowski’s concepts of levels was done by Gage, Morse, and Piechowski (1981) by using the Campbell and Fiske (1959) multitrait - multimethod approach to convergent and discriminant validity. Convergent validity was shown by obtaining significant correlations between level scores (traits) measured by four different methods: (a) the DRI, (b) a 10-page autobiography, (c) a situation-choice test, and (d) a situation-reason test. Discriminant validity was based on the finding that level variation was greater than method variation.

### A New View of Levels

In Dabrowski’s theory complex emotions, called “dynamisms,” form the cognitive-emotional structure of the personality and are the concepts by which developmental level has been assigned in the past. These dynamisms were difficult for raters to grasp conceptually and to code reliably, and only the lack of dynamisms could be coded for level I. Therefore, the intent of a recent project was to construct and test a new coding system in which dynamisms are seen as reflecting the nature of an individual’s values, self-

concerns, and relationships to others (Miller, 1985). It was hypothesized that conceptualizing levels in this manner would preserve the original designation while placing levels in more comprehensible categories that could be assessed more reliably.

The coding system consists of three categories and fifteen subcategories designed to reflect values, self-concerns, and relationships at the five theoretical levels of development. The categories represent motivations which are assumed to direct the behavior of individuals. The categories and subcategories were derived from the dynamisms and descriptions of developmental levels in Dabrowski’s theory. Value orientations (Allport, Vernon, and Lindzey, 1960) found to correlate with levels (Hazell, 1984) were used in the definitions of value subcategories in the coding manual.

**A** brief description from the coding manual will be presented to exemplify the nature of values, self-feelings, and relationships at each level. Short examples from actual data will be given for many of the categories.

#### Level I

*Self-Serving* values mainly further one’s own interest. Two primary values are the pursuit of wealth or material possessions and the desire to gain and exercise power and control. External rather than internal qualities are valued.

[Ideal self] I’d like to be someone important — that is, have power and status and enjoy other people’s respect and admiration.

*Egocentricity* is expressed as self-centeredness and concern with self-preservation. Self-centered concerns are about external aspects such as appearance.

[Things on which you reflect] Changing my appearance, attitude, and be-

Figure 1.  
Category Coding System Diagram

	Feelings Toward Values	Feelings Toward Self	Feelings Toward Others
LEVEL I:	Self-Serving	Egocentricity	Superficial
LEVEL II:	Stereotypical	Ambivalence	Adaptive
LEVEL III:	Individual	Inner Conflict	Interdependent
LEVEL IV:	Universal	Self-Direction	Democratic
LEVEL V:	Transcendent	Peace and Harmony	Communionistic

havior. Such as being a little more feminine in my walk or putting on make-up. Mainly things that effect my external appearance.

There is no intrapersonal conflict; all conflict is externalized by finding fault with others.

[Frustration] When my intention to manipulate is bared or when my ability to manipulate is taken away by someone who sees through the game or someone who is better than me at the game.

Superficial relationships occur impulsively or by chance. Feelings of communality are engendered by group activities or by belonging to a team, family, or ethnic group. Other people are used for one's own purposes.

### Level II

Stereotypical values are those held by one's own family or community that are fixed or conventional. Values are relative and are internalized uncritically from external sources.

[Ideal self] (a) Healthy - preferably thinner (b) Married (c) Being able to balance a successful career with a complete family life (d) Being content financially

Ambivalence is a mixture of feelings toward one's self. There are opposing views of self due to lack of inner direction. There is self-doubt based on the evaluations of others and a strong, personal need for approval and acceptance.

Sometimes I want two things to happen in the space of one time frame. And I don't make a choice - I'll overcome it - I begin to dance - then faster and faster I'll want closeness and distance - I'll want to be independent and vulnerable - I'll want to be the helper and the helped - the leader, the follower.

Adaptive describes the way one relates to others. One adapts to social expectations by assuming traditional roles in relationships. Fluctuating moods and feelings may lead to shifting allegiances and lack of commitment.

### Level III

Individual values are based on self-evaluated standards that begin to form a value hierarchy for one's behavior. By becoming aware of different levels of conflicts in all aspects of life, the individual begins to sort out higher and lower levels of experiences. An important issue is concern with morality and the standards of right versus wrong conduct based on internal criteria.

I find myself willing and able to stand up for what I believe is right and just. But I am tempted to back

down from my position if others oppose my viewpoint. It is a struggle to continue to act on principle and not "join the crowd."

Inner Conflict results from introspection and critical evaluation of one's behavior based on one's own moral standards. This internal conflict may take various forms, such as (a) disappointment because one did not take the opportunity to put one's principles into action; (b) discontent and anger with one's attitudes and behavior; (c) a sense of wonder, surprise, and even shock at one's reactions in situations; (d) distress and embarrassment over what one sees as personality deficiencies; and (e) anguish about moral failures.

I feel that way a lot lately [inadequate, unworthy, not good enough]. What seems lacking though aren't so much specific skills, talents, as much as inability to function as I think I should. If I can't be responsive to others, can't be caring, able to do — when I become so focused in on me and my frustrations, I feel worthless.

Interdependent relationships are judged by the standards of mutuality and reciprocity. There is a growing desire to know and understand others which leads to more depth in relationships. Involvements are more selective and more personal, yet there is a sense of closeness to others besides intimate friends and loved ones.

### Level IV

Universal values are those universally agreed upon, such as sensitivity to the suffering of others. They are based on independent convictions. An autonomously evaluated hierarchy of values is organized and developed which reflects high ethical and moral standards.

All of my conscious life I have sought out wisdom. Ever since I was a very young child, I have wanted to be wise more than anything. I have sought out sound judgment and actively attempted to learn fair, honest and wise dealing — within myself and in the outer world.

Self-Direction is development directed by conscious choice. This is accomplished by becoming aware of one's uniqueness and developmental needs. Comparison of oneself is with his or her own ideal not the norm. There is genuine self-acceptance. Self-reflection and self-discipline are a necessary part of self-direction as desirable traits are fostered in the personality and undesirable traits are eliminated.

Democratic style relationships are characterized by enduring bonds of

friendship and love. Others are accepted as unique individuals, and one is uncritical and undemanding of others. Communication with others is sincere and straightforward. Empathy toward others involves emotional sharing as well as deep understanding of the experiences of others. There is compassion for all humankind.

I think the quality of compassion is best for an ideal life. The ability to suffer with another, to understand their perspective, while honestly naming my own seems essential to building a good life. I see this attribute only being born of listening, love, a gentle yet firm discipline, an ability to wait, a curbing of untamed reactions yet requiring that one feel strongly with others. Such compassion remembers joy and sadness in a way that helps a person connect with others rather than standing in isolation from them. At the same time such compassion can only be born out of quiet reflection and a willingness to undergo disorientation from my way of seeing things and doing things.

### Level V

Transcendent values encompass universal values but surpass the material realm and involve the spiritual life. Concern is for the unity of the cosmos and the individual's relationship to its totality. The goal is to reach one's own ideals in moral judgment and practice.

[Ideal self] To have wisdom and understanding, not merely knowledge. To be wise enough to know what can be accomplished and how and when. To have the eternal (rather than temporal) perspective.

Inner Peace and Harmony within oneself is an intuitive synthesis of development that occurs through insights gained by meditation and contemplation. There is confidence in the direction of one's development and its universality in all aspects of personality. Peace and harmony are achieved by independence from social pressures and egocentric drives. Individual freedom is based on self-choice. Satisfaction with life depends on achieving inner perfection.

Communionistic relationships involve intimate sharing and spiritual unions. Universal love is attained, and one has empathy for all living things. Responsibility for others is accepted, and sacrifice is made willingly for the sake of others.

[Ideal self] The ability to love all people and all things unconditionally. That involves great gentleness and strength, patience, and faith. I would

choose to help bring all people to the highest level of spiritual and intellectual awareness they could attain. I would choose to be there myself — to be so out of myself that I was apart of all things. I don't know if that can happen totally in this world.

## Results

When a random sample of 25 questionnaires were rated by ten new coders, the new coding system was found to be more systematic, objective, and reliable than the previous coding system (Miller, 1985). Questionnaires were sampled from 269 completed in eight previous studies (Beach, 1980; Brennan, 1986; Felder, 1982; Hazell, 1982; Lysy, 1979; Robert, 1984; Silverman & Ellsworth, 1980; Silverman & Sorell, 1982). Systemization and objectivity were attained by developing a coding manual with multiple examples for each category along with coding rules and procedures to be followed by raters. Interrater reliability was computed using Krippendorff's (1980) alpha which measures actual agreement and corrects for agreement by chance, thus representing a more stringent criterion for reliability than Pearson's *r*. The average reliability across ten coders was .72.

Levels are scored from 1 to 5. Overall differences between the level ratings and previous ratings averaged only .2. Therefore equivalence was established between scoring levels by dynamisms and by value, self, and other designations. This fulfilled the intent of the project. The new coding system excelled in providing additional information about personality characteristics at various levels and in ease of coding.

## Implications

The examples and definitions reported here can provide educators, parents and counselors with a greater understanding of the developmental issues which gifted youth may confront. When adolescents begin to critically examine the values of their peers and of society, inner conflict results. Too often, guidance of gifted youth is geared toward adjustment, setting realistic standards, and avoidance of conflict. The importance of internal conflict as an indication of higher level development is rarely understood. Manifestations of higher emotional development can be assessed too quickly as signs of maladaptation. That one is ambivalent, self-critical or has extremely high personal expectations is not necessarily negative. The

cognitive emotional concerns underlying these feelings need careful exploration.

Gifted students can be assisted in dealing with their intense moral concerns by being exposed to Dabrowski's theory in classes on philosophy or psychology, in leadership seminars for the gifted, in counseling groups, or in individual counseling sessions. Adolescents and adults who have studied the theory usually feel an enormous sense of relief to discover that their deepest feelings are developmentally healthy. To dream the impossible dream is to risk being laughed at and rejected by one's peer group; it takes great courage to face these reactions. Those of us who are dedicated to the gifted need to help them keep their dreams alive, despite the onslaughts they face from those who would deride their idealism.

Exposure to Dabrowski's theory helps students understand their emotional sensitivity, their empathy, their intensity, their moral concerns, and their inability at times to fit in with their peers. The theory can assist adults in guiding these students through the painful process of self-examination to the empowering process of the formation of a set of personal values. The path to higher level development is not an easy one. It is filled with conflict and struggle, but to pursue it is to increase the probability that society will be endowed with leaders with moral values, a superior perception of the reality of self, and empathy, concern, and compassion for others.

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