

"Imagining the Way"

CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS

**19th Annual SAGE Conference
The Society for the Advancement of Gifted Education**



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Piechowski's Response to William Tillier's "Conceptual differences between Piechowski and Dabrowski"¹

Michael M. Piechowski

I wish to address a few points in Bill Tillier's thoughtful and stimulating examination of what he feels are conceptual differences between Dabrowski's theory and my application of it. At the outset I can say that of the six differences named by Bill Tillier the only substantial difference exists in regard to Level I. I trust the debate will bring some clarity and perhaps even a resolution.

Nick Colangelo and I met as graduate students in the counseling program at the University of Wisconsin. During that time I wrote the monograph on Dabrowski's theory and the research on levels of development, to which Dabrowski wrote a foreword (Piechowski, 1975). I designed an Overexcitability Questionnaire and collected data. Nick, being familiar with this work, invited me to write a chapter for *New Voices in Counseling the Gifted*.

Once a theory is in the public domain it lives or dies by the research it stimulates. In the process concepts of a theory are tested. A theory can remain unchanged only if there is no research to test its validity.

Dabrowski's conception of multilevel dynamisms was not always fixed and at times tended to be fluid. However, once the research on cases representing each level was begun the set of dynamisms had to be fixed.

But are they all necessary? Dynamisms characteristic of Level III are for the most part about the same thing: inner conflict between the higher and lower in oneself, yet there is also a dynamism of inner conflict. So there is some redundancy here which raises the question whether we need to keep it. The constructs of levels became more defined than they were in Dabrowski's first extended presentation of his theory in 1964 (in Polish) or in 1967 (English version) where the main emphasis was on distinguishing multilevel from unilevel process. Most of the dynamisms of Levels IV and V were not even identified and named.

The gifted community had been given an introduction to Dabrowski's theory by Ogburn (1979), Piechowski (1986, 1991, 1997), Nelson (1989) and Silverman (1993). These publications paved the ground for a serious consideration of the theory in gifted education as evidenced by inclusion in *Social-Emotional Development of Gifted Children: What Do We Know* (Neihart, Reis, Robinson, & Moon, 2002) and eventually S. Mendaglio's *Dabrowski's Theory of Positive Disintegration*. The field embraced overexcitabilities as characteristic of gifted children right

¹ Piechowski, M. M. (2009). Piechowski's response to William Tillier's "Conceptual differences between Piechowski and Dabrowski" In J. Frank, H. Curties, & G. Finlay, (Eds.). *Imagining the way: Proceedings from the 19th Annual SAGE Conference* (pp. 70 - 74). Unpublished Manuscript. (Proceedings from the 19th Annual SAGE Conference. November 7-8, 2008, University of Calgary, Calgary AB.).

away. Acceptance of the idea of development through positive disintegration took longer. The research on levels of development within and outside of gifted education has been summarized by Falk and Miller (2009) and it shows that it was not as negligible as Bill Tillier makes it appear.

It is perhaps worth mentioning why didn't we emphasize Dabrowski's view of neuroses and psychoneuroses, although we kept mentioning it. In education in the 70s there was a strong reaction to Rogers's client-centered therapy. Rogers saw little difference between counseling and therapy. Schools did not want counselors to engage in therapy.

Therapy was seen as something for sick people, it carried a stigma. But gifted children were living under the dark cloud of old myths that they are odd, abnormal, weak or sickly. To try to explain psychoneuroses in that climate would have been disastrous.

(1) The titling and focus of the theory.

I have tried to explain to Bill Tillier more than once that analogous to a "theory of moral development" a "theory of emotional development" is a generic term describing the *domain* of the theory. I made this choice at the time when Kohlberg's cognitive theory was dominant—a theory that denied any importance to the role of emotions in cognition and moral development—to emphasize the pioneering character of Dabrowski's theory.

It is customary to think of personality theories as something larger than emotional development because of the grand theories of Freud, Jung, and Adler, but what in personality development does not involve emotional life? As we now know from brain research, everything is emotionally connected.

(2) General confusion over the levels.

In regard to Levels I and II what I said was that Dabrowski's theory would lose none of its value were these levels not included, since the theory is mainly about multilevel development.

(3) The nature of level I.

It is not my opinion but Dabrowski's that there is little, if any, inner life at Level I. For Dabrowski development did not begin at level I.

Since this level emphatically is not the starting point of development, calling it "primary integration" is a misnomer. If multilevel potential is present it precludes the possibility of Level I.

(4) The nature of level II

Over the years I have come to the understanding that many developmental paths are possible and that emotional growth can take place in Level II even though it lacks multilevel character

(Piechowski, 2008). Partial disintegrations and partial integrations are surely more common than the pathologies. Dabrowski wrote: “Partial disintegrations followed by partial integrations at a higher level characterize the developmental pattern of people with average developmental potential” (Dabrowski, 1972, p. 300). The “higher level” is not specified, therefore, it can be confined to advancement within Level II. I don’t think Level II should be interpreted as narrowly and as pathologically as Bill Tillier wants.

(5) The role of developmental potential

I think that Bill Tillier misunderstands my saying that there is other research material that is available to fill in the picture of unilevel process—it is not a question of two different kinds of developmental potential but the variations of developmental potential from individual to individual. But he does ask good questions even though the basis for them is nothing more than my whimsical exercise in imagination.

One should note that self-centered values and motives are more characteristic of Level I than of Level II.

(6) The role of self-actualization in development.

This is the most interesting part of Bill Tillier’s examination of the alleged differences because it is here that we have to separate the theory from the person of the author. Bill Tillier says of self-actualization “As Maslow used the term, and as it was generally understood, it was at odds with Dabrowski’s approach.” First of all, Maslow studied self-actualizing people and did not propose an abstract notion of “self-actualization” as a terminal state. Secondly, the way “the term is generally understood” is in sharp contrast with how Maslow described self-actualizing people (Maslow, 1970). They are people of strong character, not guided by ego but by universal values. They have a mission in life that serves humanity. They have a deep sense of social responsibility. Consequently, they are not bound by their own culture but transcend it, they have genuine caring and respect for all persons, they abhor humor that demeans others, they value privacy and solitude because their source of strength lies in their own inner growth. But they enjoy life and are not riddled with inner conflict. Dabrowski’s view of multilevel development was tinged with asceticism, which is not necessarily the preference of people at Level IV. Since inner struggle and conflict abate at this level, the only point of contention is enjoyment of life.

Tillier says: “Dabrowski 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 term “animal instincts” is woefully vague because it encompasses too much: seeking food and shelter, securing survival, curiosity, learning, nesting behavior, and everything else. Further, some animals mate for life, therefore represent in their own way the exclusivity of relationships that Dabrowski valued so highly. Higher primates and dolphins, too, are capable of altruistic

behavior. Humans and animals share social instincts. We have much worse things to overcome than animal instincts: prejudice, greed, desire to control others, desire to impose our views on others, indifference, manipulating truth, gossiping, criticizing and ridiculing others, intentionally hurting others, exploitation, and so on ad infinitum. If undesirable motives and behaviors are to be overcome, they first have to be accepted, otherwise denial and repression will keep them coming back. Self-acceptance does not contradict inner transformation.

Both Maslow and Dabrowski studied real people but the difference was that Maslow was interested in those whom he saw as psychologically healthy because they were fulfilling their potential, therefore they were not, as he said, “stunted.” He did not investigate how they became self-actualizing. Dabrowski emphasized that psychological health is a function of multilevel development, and here the ideas of the two men meet.

Bill Tillier offered only views and opinions in regard to the differences between Dabrowski and Maslow, which is not enough to invalidate the correspondence found in the painstakingly detailed examination of how the terms of Dabrowski’s concept of level IV and Maslow’s descriptive terms of self-actualization intersect. The correspondence was worked out on Dabrowski’s own choice of Saint-Exupéry as representing Level IV. Further research confirms it (cf. Falk & Miller, 2009; Piechowski, 2008). Consequently, individuals who are at Level IV are self-actualizing but the reverse may not be true and has not been tested.

It is a pity that Dabrowski never understood that placing self-actualizing people within the structure of his theory, rather than diminish it, showed its power. A convergence of two independently developed constructs confirms and validates what they depict as an objective reality.

In my experience the understanding of the nature of theories among social scientists is rather limited. People come upon a new idea and call it a theory whether or not it deserves to be called a theory. A theory’s task is to offer a means of explanation of a set of phenomena or relationships between them. But unlike the natural sciences where a theory’s merit lies in what it can do, in social sciences a theory comes with an element of territorial imperative, of ownership, where people shrink from comparisons of their own theory with other theories.

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