

A Brief Overview Dabrowski's Theory of Positive Disintegration and its Relevance For the Gifted.

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Abstract

Dabrowski presents a theory of personality development based on a multilevel, hierarchical view of life. The theory suggests individual developmental potentials are important factors in determining the course of personality growth. Developmental potential includes three aspects; special talents and abilities, a physiological measure of neural reactivity Dabrowski called overexcitability (OE) and a factor describing an inner motivation to develop. Individuals with strong developmental potential tend to experience frequent and intense crises (positive disintegrations) that create opportunities for the development of an autonomous, self-crafted personality. Dabrowski observed that gifted and creative populations tend to exhibit increased levels of developmental potential and thus may be predisposed to experience the process of positive disintegration. While recent work has focussed on the link between overexcitability and giftedness, developmental potential and giftedness are not synonymous, indeed, many (most) with developmental potential will not be classified as gifted, and many gifted will display little overall developmental potential. A brief overview of Dabrowski's theory and its relevance for gifted individuals are presented.

Paper

Kazimierz Dabrowski (1902 - 1980) advanced a theory of individual personality development based on a progression from an initial, lower integration, through a sequence of disintegrations, culminating in a second, higher integration (see note one). Dabrowski called his work the Theory of Positive Disintegration to reflect the central and positive role disintegration plays in development. He believed that some individuals are predisposed to experience life more intensely and this predisposes them to frequent and severe crisis. This heightened sensitivity is based on genetic characteristics Dabrowski called developmental potential. The presence of increased sensitivity combined with crises (disintegration) represent an increased opportunity to develop to advanced levels of personality.

In his research, Dabrowski found that gifted and creative individuals tend to exhibit higher levels of developmental potential and therefore are predicted to experience increased disintegration and personality growth. This is the basis of recent applications of the theory to the gifted (see note two).

This paper will discuss Dabrowski's basic ideas and apply his theory to the gifted.

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Dabrowski's Theory

Dabrowski observed that most people live their lives in a state of primitive integration guided by biological impulses (first factor) and/or by uncritical adherence to social convention (second factor). He called this initial integration Level I. Creative expression at Level I is influenced and constrained by these first two factors. First factor tends to channel giftedness and talents toward accomplishing self-serving goals. Often these talents are used in antisocial ways. For example, many criminals display this selfish creativity in the service of advancing their goals at the expense of others. The second factor constrains individual creativity by encouraging a group view of life and discouraging unique thought and expression. Second factor shapes creativity into forms that follow and support the existing social milieu.

Dabrowski also described a group of people who display an individualized developmental pathway. These people break away from an automatic, socialized view of life (what Dabrowski called "negative adjustment") and move into a series of disintegrations. If development continues, people go on to develop an individualized, conscious and critically evaluated hierarchical value structure (called "positive adjustment"). The hierarchy of values comes to act as a benchmark by which all things are seen and the higher values in the hierarchy direct behavior. These higher, individual values characterize a second integration reflecting individual autonomy. At this level, each person develops his or her own vision of how life ought to be. This higher level is associated with strong individual approaches to problem solving and creativity. Giftedness and creativity are applied in the service of these higher individual values and visions of how life could be. The individual expresses his or her talents energetically, through action, through art, through social change, etc.

Advanced development is often seen in people who exhibit strong developmental potential. Developmental potential represents a constellation of genetic features, expressed and mediated through environmental interaction, that consist of three major aspects: overexcitability (OE), specific abilities and talents, and a strong drive toward autonomous growth, a feature Dabrowski called the third factor.

The most evident and perhaps most fundamental aspect of developmental potential is overexcitability (OE), a heightened physiological experience of sensory stimuli resulting from increased neuronal sensitivities. The greater the OE, the more intense the sensory experience of life. In short, the individual is more sensitive to experiences in life.

Dabrowski presented five forms of OE: psychomotor, sensual, imaginal, intellectual and emotional. These overexcitabilities, especially the latter three, often cause a person to experience daily life more intensely and to feel the extremes of the joys and sorrows of life profoundly. Dabrowski found that heightened overexcitability in groups of gifted and creative individuals demonstrated their intense sensual experiences. Combined with imaginal and intellectual OE, create a rich source of creative material. Additionally, psychomotor and emotional OE often provide strong stamina and motivation, often expressed in "bouts" of intense work and creativity.

Although based in the nervous system, overexcitabilities are expressed psychologically through the development of structures that reflect the emerging self. The most important of these conceptualizations are dynamisms: biological or mental forces that control behavior and its development. "Instincts, drives, and intellectual processes combined with emotions are dynamisms" (Dabrowski, 1972, p. 294). With advanced development, dynamisms increasingly reflect movement toward autonomy. The second arm of developmental potential, specific abilities and talents, tends to serve the individual's developmental level. As outlined, individuals at lower levels use talents to support egocentric goals or to climb the social and corporate ladders. At higher levels, specific talents and abilities become an important force as they are channelled by the individual's value hierarchy into expressing and achieving the person's vision of his or her ideal personality and his or her view of what "ought to be" in the world.

The third aspect of developmental potential, the third factor, is a drive towards individual growth and autonomy. Third factor is important in creativity for two reasons: first, it directs talents and creativity toward autonomous expression, and second, it provides motivation to strive for more - to try to imagine and achieve goals currently beyond the individual's grasp.

The first and fifth levels are characterized by psychological integration, harmony and little inner conflict. As outlined above, the first level is called primitive or primary integration and consists of people who show either prominent First Factor ("heredity" / impulse) and/or Second Factor ("social environment"). The majority of people at Level I are integrated at the environmental or social level (Dabrowski called them "average" people): however, many also exhibit shades of both impulse and socialization. Dabrowski distinguished the two subgroups of Level I by degree, "the state of primary integration is a state contrary to mental health. A fairly high degree of primary integration is present in the average person; a very high degree of primary integration is present in the psychopath" (Dabrowski, 1964, p. 121). (see note three).

Levels II, III and IV describe various levels and types of disintegration. The character of Level II is reflected in its name: Unilevel Disintegration. The prominent feature of this level is an initial, brief, and often intense crisis or series of crises. Crises are spontaneous and only occur on one level (and often involve only one dimension). "Unilevel disintegration occurs during developmental crises such as puberty or menopause, in periods of difficulty in handling some stressful external event, or under psychological and psychopathological conditions such as nervousness and psychoneurosis. Unilevel disintegration consists of processes on a single structural and emotional level; there is a prevalence of automatic dynamisms with only slight self-consciousness and self-control" (Dabrowski, 1964, p. 6). Conflicts on the same level (horizontal) produce ambitendencies and ambivalences: the person is pulled between different but equivalent choices (ambitendencies) and is not able decide what to do (ambivalence). Ultimately, the individual is thrust into an existential crisis: his or her social rationales no longer account for his or her experiences and no alternate explanations exist. During this phase, existential despair is the predominant emotion. The resolution of this phase begins as individually chosen values are integrated into a "new" hierarchy of personal values. These new values often

conflict with the person's previous social values. Many of the "status quo" explanations for the "way things are," learned through education and from the social order, collapse under conscious, individual scrutiny. This causes more conflicts focussed on the individual's analysis of his or her own reactions to the world at large and of the behavior of others. Common behaviors and the ethics of the prevailing social order become seen as inadequate, wrong or hypocritical. "Positive maladjustment" prevails. For Dabrowski, these crises represent a strong potential for development toward personal growth and mental health. Using a positive definition, mental health reflects more than social conformity: it involves a careful, personal examination of the world and of one's values leading to the development of an individual personality.

The expression of positive maladjustment can often be seen in both individual creativity and in creative movements at this level. For example, Cubism and Dadaism, with their chaotic forms are examples of creativity expressing positive maladjustment -- the rejection and overthrow of the "standard views" of art and life.

Level II is a transitional period. Dabrowski said you either fall back, move ahead or end negatively, in suicide or psychosis. "Prolongation of unilevel disintegration often leads to reintegration on a lower level, to suicidal tendencies, or to psychosis" (Dabrowski, 1964, p. 7).

The transition from level II to level III involves a fundamental shift that requires a phenomenal amount of energy. This period is the crossroads of development as from here one must either progress or regress. The struggle between Dabrowski's Factors reflect this transitional crisis: "Do I follow my instincts (First Factor), my teachings (Second Factor) or my heart (Third Factor)?" The developmental answer is to transform one's lower instincts (automatic reactions like anger) into positive motivation, to resist rote, social answers and to listen to one's own, inner sense of "what you ought to do."

Level III describes the vertical conflicts caused by an involuntary perception of higher versus lower choices in life (because it is involuntary, Dabrowski called it spontaneous multilevel disintegration). Dabrowski called this vertical dimension multilevelness. Multilevelness is a gradual realization of the "possibility of the higher" (a phrase Dabrowski used frequently) and of the subsequent contrasts between the higher and the lower in life. These vertical comparisons often illustrate the lower, actual behavior of a person in contrast to higher, imagined ideals and alternate choices. When a person perceives the higher choice, it becomes obvious that this is the path one ought to follow. When the person's actual behavior falls short of the ideal, disharmony and a drive to review and reconstruct one's life often follow. Multilevelness thus represents a new and powerful type of conflict, a conflict that is potentially developmental.

These vertical conflicts are critical in leading to autonomy and advanced personality growth. If the person is to achieve higher levels, the shift to multilevelness must occur. If a person does not have the developmental potential to move into a multilevel view, then they would fall back from the crises of Level II to reintegrate at Level I.

In the shift to multilevelness, the "horizontal" (unilevel), stimulus-response model of life is replaced by a vertical and hierarchical analysis. This vertical view becomes anchored by one's emerging individual value structure and all events are seen in relation to personal ideals. These personal value ideals become the personality ideal: how the person wants to live his or her life. As events in life are seen in relation to this multilevel, vertical view, it becomes impossible to support positions that favor the lower course when higher goals can be identified (or imagined).

In level IV the individual takes full control of his or her development. The involuntary spontaneous development of level III is replaced by a deliberate, conscious and self-directed review of life from the multilevel perspective. This level marks the emergence of "the third factor," described by Dabrowski as an autonomous factor "of conscious choice (valuation) by which one affirms or rejects certain qualities in oneself and in one's environment" (Dabrowski, 1972, p. 306). The person consciously reviews his or her existing belief system and tries to replace his or her lower, automatic views and reactions with carefully thought-out, examined and chosen ideals. These "new" values will increasingly be reflected in the person's behavior. Behaviour becomes less reactive, less automatic, and more deliberate as behavioral choices fall under the influence of the person's higher, chosen ideals.

One's social orientation comes to reflect a deep responsibility based on both intellectual and emotional factors. At the highest levels, "individuals of this kind feel responsible for the realization of justice and for the protection of others against harm and injustice. Their feelings of responsibility extend almost to everything" (Dabrowski, 1973, p. 97). This perspective results from seeing life in relation to one's hierarchy of values (the multilevel view) and the subsequent appreciation of the potential of how life could be, and ought to be, lived. One's disagreements with the (lower level) world are expressed compassionately in doing what one can to help achieve the "ought."

Given their genuine (authentic) pro-social outlook, those individuals achieving higher development would also raise the level of their society. "Pro-social" here is not just support of the existing social order. If the social order is "lower" and you are adjusted to it, then you also reflect the lower ("negative adjustment" in Dabrowski's terms, a Level I feature). Here, pro-social is a genuine cultivation of social interactions based on higher values. These positions often conflict with the status quo of a lower society ("positive maladjustment'). In other words, to be maladjusted to a low level society is a positive feature. The fifth level displays an integrated and harmonious character, but one vastly different from that at the first level. At this highest level, one's behavior is guided by conscious, carefully weighed decisions based upon an individualized and chosen hierarchy of personal values. Behaviour conforms to this inner standard of how life "ought" to be lived and thus, little inner conflict arises in one's life.

Creative expression and the accomplishments of the gifted find their most individual expression at Levels IV and V. Especially at Level V, problem solving and art come to represent the highest and noblest features of human life. Art captures the inner most emotional states and is based upon a deep empathy and understanding of the subject. Often human suffering and sacrifice are the subjects of these works. Truly visionary works, works that are unique and novel, are created by individuals

expressing a vision unrestrained by convention. Advances in society, through politics, philosophy, and religion are therefore commonly associated with strong individual creativity or accomplishments.

Applications of the Theory of Positive Disintegration

The Theory of Positive Disintegration (TPD) has an extremely broad scope and has implications for many areas. One central application applies to psychological and psychiatric diagnosis and treatment. Dabrowski advocated a comprehensive, multilevel diagnosis of the person's situation, including his or her symptoms and his or her developmental potentials. If the disintegration appears to fit into a developmental context, then the person is educated in the theory and encouraged to take a developmental view of his or her situation and experiences. Rather than trying to eliminate symptoms, they are reframed to yield insight and understanding into life and the person's unique situation. Dabrowski illustrated his theory in the autobiographies of, and biographies about, those who have experienced positive disintegration and he encouraged autobiography as a step in the process of autopsychotherapy. For Dabrowski, the goal of therapy is to eliminate the therapist by providing a context within which a person could understand and help him or herself. The gifted child, or the suicidal teen, or the troubled artist is often experiencing the features of the TPD and if they accept and understand the meaning of their feelings and crises, they can move ahead, not fall apart.

A second primary focus is on education, and in particular, on the experience of creative or gifted students. Dabrowski hypothesized that these students will disproportionately show strong overexcitability and therefore will be prone to the disintegrative process.

Dabrowski and the Gifted Individual

In an appendix to Dabrowski (1967), results of investigations done in 1962 with Polish youth are reported (see note four). Specifically, "a group of gifted children and young people, aged 8 to 23' were examined (Dabrowski, 1967, p. 251). Of the 80 youth studied, 30 were "intellectually gifted" and 50 were from "drama, ballet, and plastic art schools'(Dabrowski, 1967, p. 251). Dabrowski found that "every one" of the children displayed overexcitability, "which constituted the foundation for the emergence of neurotic and psychoneurotic sets. Moreover it turned out that these children also showed sets of nervousness, neurosis, and psychoneurosis of various kinds and intensities, from light vegetative symptoms, or anxiety symptoms, to distinctly and highly intensive psychasthenic or hysterical sets" (Dabrowski, 1967, p. 253). Dabrowski asked why these children should display such "states of nervousness or psychoneurosis" and suggested that it was due to the presence of OE (Dabrowski, 1967, p. 255). "Probably the cause is more than average sensitivity which not only permits one to achieve outstanding results in learning and work, but at the same time increases the number of points sensitive to all experiences that may accelerate anomalous reactions revealing themselves in psychoneurotic sets' (Dabrowski, 1967, p. 255).

Dabrowski was always very cautious about the implications of high IQ. He said that the overall developmental profile is critical. By definition, a person with a high IQ would display increased

developmental potential as special abilities are a component of developmental potential. However, Dabrowski described a type of development he called one-sided. In one-sided development, a person may have very significant talents or abilities in one area but does not display an overall balanced developmental profile. This is a treacherous scenario as without a balanced profile, the enhanced qualities may be used to pursue lower ends. For example, an individual with high IQ and low emotions and low morality may use their intelligence to achieve a selfish agenda and become another Hitler.

The association between OE and giftedness appears to be borne out in the research (Lysy & Piechowski, 1983; Piechowski, 1986; Piechowski, & Miller, 1995). It appears that at the least OE is a marker of potential for gifted / creativity. The basic message of Dabrowski is that the gifted will disproportionately display this process of positive disintegration and personality growth.

The Environment and the Gifted

Today, the importance of the interaction of the individual with the environment is well recognized. "From infancy onwards, genetic individuality helps to steer the developing organism through the multitude of possible [environmental] experiences and choices" leading to a "nature via nurture" position (Bouchard, Lykken, McGue, Segal, & Tellegen, 1990). In this view, the dynamic interaction is an important factor and the effect that the individual has on shaping his or her experience is recognized. Dabrowski suggested that "there are very few people among us who are consciously independent of the external environment" (Dabrowski, 1967, p. 12). Most people generally take what the environment gives them for granted and the interactive components play out their dynamics on an unconscious stage: Dabrowski's second factor. How we live largely depends on what happens to us and our behavior is largely reactive and unconscious. Once positive disintegration begins, this changes. A person's "relation to his environment becomes more and more conscious, clear, and determined. He selects from it elements on which he places value. He becomes more independent," gradually moving toward third factor (Dabrowski, 1964, pp. 61-62).

The presence of OE increases the significance of the role played by the person-environment interaction. As a person's confidence in his or her developing personality becomes stronger, one comes to choose his or her environment more consciously, deciding what in the environment to respond to and how. While rejection of unacceptable environmental features may cause further developmental conflict, it is also an important aspect of the emerging autonomous personality. As development proceeds, the environment shapes the person less while the person shapes the environment more. Opinion on the ideal environment for the gifted is divided into two basic themes. One is a stress-free setting where things are as positive, accepting and pressureless as possible -- the "bullish environment" (Sternberg & Lubart, 1995). The other approach is called the "bearish environment" (Sternberg & Lubart, 1995). Here, obstacles arise that challenge the individual. Successfully mastering these obstacles strengthens the character and abilities of the person. Sternberg reviews these positions and concludes that "it helps to have a generally favorable environment sprinkled with some obstacles along the way" (Sternberg & Lubart, 1995, p. 256). However, in Dabrowski's theory, this dichotomy does not reflect the real complexity involved in

understanding creativity. For Dabrowski, several critical elements are involved, including the physiological reaction of the individual to the environment (OE), the dynamic interplay of the person with the environment, and any resultant conflicts and disintegrations that arise.

Dabrowski emphasized the role of environmental events would be most important when genetic dispositions are equivocal. When genetic potentials are strong, environment plays less of a role. Dabrowski said "the worst environment will not stop the strongest genetics, the best environment cannot overcome the worst genetics" (K. Dabrowski, personal communication, 1978).

Developmental Potential: A Mixed Blessing?

Dabrowski called OE "a tragic gift" to reflect that the road of the person with strong OE is not a smooth or easy one (M. Rankel, personal communication, April 6, 1996). Potentials to experience great highs are also potentials to experience great lows. Similarly, potentials to express great creativity simultaneously hold the likelihood of experiencing a great deal of personal conflict and stress. This stress both drives development and is a result of developmental conflicts, both intrapsychic and social. Suicide is a significant risk in the acute phases of this stress. The isolation often experienced by these young people heightens the risks of self-harm (see note five). Dabrowski advocated educating the person about OEs and the disintegrative process to give them a context within which to understand their intense feelings and needs. This context is a positive and developmental one. Dabrowski suggested that individuals be given support in their efforts to develop and find their own self-expression. To be out of step is encouraged and seen as a feature of the overall developmental journey. Social maladjustment is also encouraged, particularly when it is positive and based on individually thought-out values. Young people who are seen as "squares" because they prefer to study instead of partying are an example. Many of these children have to "find and walk their own path" often at the expense of fitting in with their social peers and even with their families.

Piechowski, and subsequently Silverman, have begun the process of measuring OE in the gifted (see note six). These are important first steps in applying a Dabrowskian approach to the gifted. Other exciting avenues have begun, for example, efforts to counsel the gifted to help them see their overexcitabilities and disintegrations as positive features (Ogburn-Colangelo, 1979).

A Case Study

"M ----, a girl 10 years old of asthenic-schizothymic type, had marked mathematical and scientific abilities and was dutiful, with a tendency to be overly so. After good progress in one school she was moved to another, more extroverted system, where the teachers were prone to superficial appreciation of their students, basing their opinions on the pupil's boldness and originality. M ----, a rather shy girl with excessive inhibitions, withdrew from these new conditions and for several weeks showed both shyness and anxiety. She obtained marks that were fairly good, but much lower than in her former school. Her anxieties increased; she became resentful, slept badly, lost weight, and was

either irritable or withdrawn. After several months her marks improved, although she lost confidence in some of her teachers. When her parents discussed with her the possibility of moving to another class or another school, she replied: 'It seems to me that in another class or school there will be similar teachers. I don't want to change. Always, only some of the teachers and some of the other students will like me. That's the way people are, and that's the way I am.' In this case, disintegration occurred in an ambitious girl with a strong sense of justice, resulting in withdrawal and resentment. The fact that she did not wish to transfer to another class or school seems to be explained by emotional exhaustion and, at the same time, an increasingly realistic attitude toward the environment and patterns of interaction with it. This is a sign of partial, still insufficient, but clear rebuilding. Secondary integration is evident in M ----'s new appreciation of herself and others but is still combined with a feeling of disappointment and a certain degree of compromise." (Dabrowski, 1964, p. 105).

Conclusion

It is beyond this paper to explore Dabrowski's theory fully. The central point is that Dabrowski saw the gifted as a special subset of people, a subset prone to experience positive disintegration. This opportunity presents both creative possibilities and risks to the developing self. If the individual fails to navigate these risks, a sad outcome of underachievement, addiction or suicide is possible. To avoid this, Dabrowski advocated providing a supportive and encouraging environment. Additionally, he suggested the individual be provided with the developmental context of positive disintegration. We cannot ease the experience of OEs or the literal pain of development. Still, we can and must give it context and shepherd our gifted youth through the height of their developmental crises. Individual creativity and expression of talent must be valued as an expression of higher personality development.

Note one: Dabrowski's theory is presented in: Dabrowski, 1937, 1964, 1966, 1967, 1970, 1972, 1973, 1996.

Note two: Recent applications to the gifted are represented by the following research: Brennan & Piechowski, 1991; Lewis, Kitano, & Lynch, 1992; Miller, Silverman, & Falk, 1994; Piechowski, 1974, 1975, 1978, 1979, 1986, 1989, 1991; Piechowski & Colangelo, 1984; Piechowski & Cunningham, 1985; Piechowski & Miller, 1995; Piechowski, Silverman & Falk, 1985; Silverman, 1983, 1986, 1989, 1991, 1993a, 1993b, 1994; Silverman & Schupp, 1989.

Note three: Dabrowski's description of Level I as "psychopathic" reflects an earlier definition of the term: one that emphasized individual factors (genetic features as opposed to social factors) that act to impede a person's developmental course. This broad usage encompasses both malignant criminals and upstanding citizens who blindly and uncritically follow every social precept. This has created controversy and confusion in the theory as Dabrowski said that most of society's members live on Level I (see Dabrowski, 1964, pp. 4-10). Other authors have introduced the term "robopath" to describe the "unauthentic life" based on a robot-like reaction to life (Bertalanffy, 1967; Yablonsky, 1972). Bertalanffy (1967) was critical of psychology's approach to the human as a lab rat. He

extended his criticism to society and the structure of modern life that demands "reaching optimal psychosocial equilibrium by answering outside demands in reinforced responses" (Bertalanffy, 1967, p. 9). Bertalanffy lamented that people were losing their autonomy in a stimulus-response society, a society where an individual does not need to reflect or to think but merely to respond, a society geared to meeting external performance standards as measures of success. Yablonsky (1972) uses the term robopath "to describe people whose pathology entails robot-like behavior and existence. Robopaths have what Kierkegaard called 'sickness unto death'" (Yablonsky, 1972, p. 7). Yablonsky says that robopaths are "socially dead" and function based on 'pseudo-image" they are egocentric and lack compassion for others. 'Their existential state is a human" (Yablonsky, 1972, p. 7). Yablonsky elaborates how our modern society encourages "the emergence of robopathology." Also relevant is Rieber (1997) and his views on the "normalized psychopathy" of today's culture. These descriptions, especially Bertalanffy's and Rieber's, appear to apply to a person who follows precepts uncritically and who simply "follows orders" in living life -- Dabrowski's idea of the second factor.

Note four: The appendix is titled: "Personality, outstanding abilities, and psychoneurosis in children and young people"

Note five: Self-harm is a common feature of those with high developmental potential and the central risk during the height of developmental crises (Dabrowski, 1937).

Note six: Recent research on measuring overexcitability includes: Brennan & Piechowski, 1991; Miller, Silverman, & Falk, 1994; Piechowski, 1974, 1975, 1978, 1979, 1986, 1989, 1991; Piechowski & Colangelo, 1984; Piechowski & Cunningham, 1985; Piechowski & Miller, 1995; Piechowski, Silverman & Falk, 1985; Silverman, 1983, 1986, 1989, 1991, 1993a, 1993b, 1994; Silverman & Schupp, 1989.

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