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Dabrowski's Theory of Positive Disintegration

by Elizabeth Mika

Originally presented as part of an e-conference on [Oz-Gifted-T](#), posted on Hoagies' Gifted Education Page with the author's permission.

- Theory of human personality development where the guiding role is assigned to emotions.
- Development is a progression from primary integration characterized by rigid, instinctual egocentrism to conscious altruism based on empathy, compassion and self-awareness, expressed the fullest at the highest level of development, the level of secondary integration.
- Development takes place through the process of positive disintegration, which is the loosening and partial, or sometimes global, dismantling of the initial character structure during the course of one's life and replacing it by consciously created personality.
- Development is not related to human biological maturation process, does not follow a time schedule, although it progresses along an invariable sequence.
- Development forms a hierarchy of levels characterized by the predominance of either integration or disintegration on each level.
- The level a person can attain in her development is determined by her developmental potential.

Five levels of development

1. **primary integration** – rigid, stereotypical, impulsive actions; intelligence subsumed under primitive instincts, no inner conflicts
2. **unilevel disintegration** – loosening of the previously well-integrated character structure as a result of usually external circumstances – unilevel mental disturbances are very serious and have mostly unconscious character; moral relativity
3. **spontaneous multilevel disintegration** – the emergence of multilevelness – inner conflict of ML character; a growing sense of “what ought to be” and growing maladjustment to “what is” (positive maladjustment); actions guided by an emerging autonomous hierarchy of values and goals;
4. **organized multilevel disintegration** – conscious shaping and systematization of one's behavior; conscious and planned self-transformation; growth of empathy, autonomy and clarity of values and goals;
5. **secondary integration** – organization and harmonization of personality and personality ideal; dynamisms of responsibility, authenticity and autonomy, empathy, self-perfection, personality ideal.

Level 5	Personalities
Level 4	
Level 3	Psychoneurotics
Level 2	Neuroses, mental illness Average p. and psychoneurotic Average person
	Psychopaths and average p.
Level 1	Psychopaths/psychopath-like ind.

Developmental potential

Developmental potential is the “original endowment determining the level to which an individual can develop, if his physical and social conditions are optimal.” (1984).

Developmental potential (DP) expresses the relationship between individual development and three main groups of factors influencing this development.

1. First factor – genetic and permanent physical traits (intelligence, OE, special talents, bodily constitution, temperament) (external locus of control and motivation)
2. Second factor – influences of social environment (external locus of control and motivation)
3. Third factor – autonomous forces and processes such as consciousness, inner conflict, free will and choice in one's development, conscious self-

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DP can be limited to the FIRST FACTOR – egocentric and/or antisocial behavior

DP can encompass the FIRST TWO FACTORS – convention and conformity

DP can be a result of ALL THREE FACTORS – autonomy and authenticity, transcendence of a biological cycle and social conventions, realization of personality ideal

High DP = above average **intelligence, special abilities and talents, overexcitabilities, and the third factor** (self-determination)

Three types of development

1. **“Normal”** – little DP, statistical norm, fulfillment of biological and social imperatives, no attempts at conscious self-transformation; underdevelopment of emotional functions
2. **One-sided** – one strong skill, talent or set of skills; only some emotional and intellectual potentials develop very well while the rest remain undeveloped
3. **Global (universal) and accelerated** – strong DP, all cognitive AND emotional functions develop with equal intensity, self-aware and conscious direction of one’s own development, positive disintegration

Positive disintegration

The royal path of development

Positive disintegration is a process through which an individual's development can progress from one level of functions to another, from a lower level to a higher one.

“(…) disintegration means the differentiation through loosening of structures, the dispersion and breaking up of psychic forces. The term disintegration is used to refer to a broad range of processes, from emotional disharmony to the complete fragmentation of the personality structure. Loosening and even fragmenting the internal psychic environment, and conflicts within the internal environment and with the external environment, is the ground for the birth and development of a higher psychic structure. Disintegration is the basis for developmental thrusts upward, the creation of new evolutionary dynamic, and the movement of the personality to a higher level (…).” (1964)

Disintegration can be:

- unilevel, multilevel, or pathological
- partial or global
- permanent or temporary
- positive or negative

Multilevelness

Multilevelness is a paradigm, in which different phenomena, including human behavior and human reality in general, can be seen as representing different, multiple levels of developmental achievement. Multilevelness is the result of the **hierarchization** of one’s internal and external experiences.

The hierarchization comes about as the result of **positive disintegration**. It is based on a growing awareness of universal human values and their role in shaping our personal growth.

Dynamisms

Dynamisms are instinctual-emotional-cognitive forces – present in people endowed with high developmental potential. Dynamisms, which are **intrapyschic factors**, are the forces fueling and shaping emotional development.

Developmental dynamisms arise from the interplay of high developmental potential with external conditions.

Conflicts and life difficulties are particularly important in shaping dynamisms of personality development.

Dynamisms

- **Level 2:** ambivalencies and ambidendencies (unilevel conflict), beginning of shame, temperamental syntony, extreme or changeable identification with others, second factor
- **Level 3:** hierarchization of inner conflict and development, disquietude with oneself, dissatisfaction with oneself, feelings of inferiority toward oneself, astonishment with oneself, shame and guilt, positive maladjustment, identification and empathy, inner conflict, disposing and directing center
- **Level 4:** subject-object in oneself; third factor; inner psychic transformation (transcending the biological cycle and one’s psychological type); self-awareness; self-control; self-education; autopsychotherapy; self-perfection; ML (multilevel) identification: full identification with oneself, but never with others; empathy: full empathy toward others, but never toward oneself; inner conflict (strong, ML); creative instinct
- **Level 4 – level 5:** empathy, responsibility, autonomy and authenticity, self-perfection, personality ideal, creative instinct, disposing and directing center (firmly identified with personality ideal)

Personality

Personality is a self-aware, self-chosen, self-affirmed and self-determined unity of essential individual psychic qualities that appears at the level of secondary integration

Personality consists of ...

Individual Essence - talents, abilities and our unique personal characteristics (the sense of self)

Social Essence - ties to others and to the world at large (the sense of belonging)

Types of adjustment/maladjustment

- 🟢 **Negative Adjustment** – non-creative adaptation; conformity to social conventions, lack of reflection and criticism in approach to reality, adjustment to “what is”
- 🟢 **Negative Maladjustment** – disregard for social norms and conventions stemming from extreme egocentrism and ruthless realization of one’s lower level goals (psychopaths, criminals)
- 🟢 **Positive Maladjustment** – creative nonadaptation; critical discontent with the status quo stemming from a desire to transcend what is inauthentic, harmful and unfair in our lives; maladjustment to “what is” with adjustment to “what ought to be;” also a dynamism
- 🟢 **Positive Adjustment** – adjustment to one’s personality ideal embracing the highest human values; adjustment to “what ought to be.”

Overexcitability (nervousness)

The tragic gift

Overexcitability (OE) is a higher than average capacity for experiencing internal and external stimuli, based on a higher than average responsiveness of the nervous system.

The prefix over attached to 'excitability' serves to indicate that the reactions of excitation are **over and above average in intensity, duration and frequency**. There is another essential feature characteristic for reactions of overexcitability, namely, that the **response is specific** for that type of overexcitability which is **dominant** in a given individual.

“One could say that one who manifests a given form of overexcitability, and especially one who manifests **several forms of overexcitability**, sees reality in a different, stronger and more multisided manner. Reality for such an individual ceases to be indifferent but affects him deeply and leaves long-lasting impressions. Enhanced excitability is thus a means for more frequent interactions and a wider range of experiencing.” (1972, 7)

Types of OE

1. psychomotor
2. sensual
3. imaginal
4. intellectual
5. emotional

Forms of OE

- 🟢 all-inclusive (global)/confined (narrow)
- 🟢 temporary/permanent

Overexcitability

- 🟢 an expression of the interplay between psychical and autonomic factors, which leads to an imbalance and moderate tension (when the tension is higher, we see neuroses and psychoneuroses)
- 🟢 the expression of OE - its type, form and level - depends on physical constitution, hormonal factors, level and universality of development, and social environment

“OE on the one side accelerates individual development, and on the other, is the initial phase of neuroses and psychoneuroses. Although the latter increase the developmental dynamics, they also bring dangers of tensions too great to absorb and negative disintegration as a result.” (1964)

“Children, and mainly youth exhibiting different forms of OE, particularly emotional and imaginal, possess in their developmental potential beginnings of a hierarchical psychic inner milieu. Inner tensions, inhibitions, inner conflicts, psychic crises, disappointments and maladjustment to the most common forms of reality lead to an attitude of psychological isolation, to meditation on the sense of life and death, to development of the ability to observe, to philosophical reflection; and often deepen sensitivity to suffering of others.” (1979)

“Sensitivity (OE) without a developmental outlet turns into irritability.”

“Irritability is the enemy of sensitivity – it reduces it and leads to disease.”

“Oversensitivity (OE) without inner psychic transformation brings many unnecessary conflicts with others – magnifies the differences, and lessens and obscures the most important things.” (1972)

Psychomotor OE

an excess of energy manifesting in rapid talk, restlessness, preference for violent games, sports, pressure for action, or delinquent behavior. It may either be a "pure" manifestation of the excess of energy, or it may result from the transfer of emotional tension to psychomotor forms of expression such as those mentioned above (tics and self-mutilation). (1996)

Possible Origins:

1. **genetic** (brain dysfunction)
2. history of prenatal and neonatal **trauma** (mother's illness, fetal poisoning, FAS, esp. in ADHD, tics)
3. **severe illness** in childhood (such as meningitis, for example)
4. **abusive or neglectful care-giving** in early childhood
5. **environmental conditions** – no opportunities for appropriate physical release.

Treatment of psychomotor OE:

- 🟢 find appropriate and constructive ways to release excess of PM energy through moderate involvement in sports, contacts with nature, trips, participation in Boys/Girls Scouts
- 🟢 teach relaxation techniques, use physical therapy and sensory integration techniques
- 🟢 use medication to prevent exhaustion and to aid attention, concentration and slow development of self-control
- 🟢 watch out for tendencies to self-mutilation – avoid excessive criticism and punishment

Sensual OE

a heightened ability to experience sensory pleasure manifesting in an increased need to touch and be touched, hugged, kissed; early signs of sexual interest and development; interest in food and food preparation; aesthetic interests; drama; need for comfort and luxury; need for attention and company; dislike of loneliness

Possible Origins:

1. genetic (hx of psychopathy, alcoholism)
2. illness
3. excessive parental adoration; sexual trauma

Treatment of sensual OE:

depends on the strength of DP, but in general this OE is difficult to modify toward positive disintegration due to small potential for inner transformation

- patiently encourage self-control and reflection
 - slowly build empathy for others
 - work on desensitization to overwhelming sensual stimuli
 - avoid excessive inhibitions and punishments which may lead to serious neuroses and antisocial behaviors
-

Imaginational OE

internal, image-base information processing with a relative exclusion of sensual, affective and psychomotor spheres

association of images and impressions, inventiveness, use of image and metaphor in verbal expression, strong and sharp visualization

combined with emotional OE - vivid dreams, nightmares, mixing of truth and fiction, fears of the unknown, intense living in the world of fantasy, predilection for fairy and magic tales, poetic creations, or invention of fantastic stories, tendency to prospection and retrospection, maladjustment to external reality

Possible Origins:

- largely unclear (Dabrowski)
- insecure attachment to caregivers, particularly disorganized attachment (Liotti)
- co-existing and exacerbating diseases (respiratory and heart problems)
- being an only child; excessive pampering; humiliation and feelings of inferiority induced by inappropriate parenting; traumas

Treatment of imaginational OE:

depends on the type of imaginational OE – creative or pathological (illusions, confabulations, delusions)

- reward contacts with concrete reality and adjustment to it, teach differences between illusory and real, steer imagination toward creativity rather than non-creative isolation
 - provide opportunities for relaxation, even exemption from school activities when needed in periods of particular intensity
 - use medication when needed to aid relaxation
-

Intellectual OE

processing information, and decision making are localized in the cognitive sphere; manifested as a drive to ask probing questions, quest for knowledge, theoretical thinking, reverence for logic, preoccupation with theoretical problems, etc.; most frequently associated with exceptional abilities in children

Global (all-inclusive) intellectual OE (frequent in ambiequal types – mixed introversion/extraversion) –when combined with emotional and imaginational OE, aids the development of a rich mental structure with multiple talents and great self-awareness.

Narrow (confined) intellectual OE (frequent in schizoid and introverted types) – one-sided development of specific abilities with co-existent inflexibility and life difficulties; may end in negative disintegration, or stunted growth.

Treatment of intellectual OE:

- should not be corrected or treated, but should be balanced by encouraging development of other forms of OE; particularly important to attend to a child's emotional and moral development to counteract over-intellectualization
 - encourage development of empathy and creativity
-

Emotional OE

a function of experiencing emotional relationships; manifests as strong attachments to persons, living things, or places; inhibition (timidity and shyness), excitation (enthusiasm), strong affective memory, concern with death, fears, anxieties, depressions, feelings of loneliness, need for security, concern for others, exclusive relationships, difficulties of adjustment in new environments

THE basis for multilevel positive disintegration

Emotional OE in extraversion and introversion

Extravert – emotional OE reactions are strong, very fast, uninhibited and often explosive, but quickly subsiding; extraverts with emotional OE tire (emotionally) easily, but equally easily recover;

Introvert – emotional OE reactions are strong, but are “delayed,” take longer (days, weeks, or months), and leave a permanent mark on the psyche.

Possible origins:

- hereditary – familial hx of TB, heart and circulation problems, general constitutional weakness, neuroses and mental illnesses,
- past or present illnesses – TB, heart problems, upper respiratory problems, hormonal imbalances, developmental delays, retardation, handicaps making adjustment to everyday life difficult,
- psychological factors –
 - trauma, humiliation and excessive external prohibitions and punishments leading to feelings of inferiority;
 - improper parenting (abuse, neglect), excessive parental sensitivity,
 - emotional tension in the family, unfairness in treatment of siblings;
 - excessive or disorganized attachment; excessive schoolwork;
 - excessive parental ambition;
 - too abrupt separation from mother

Treatment of emotional OE:

- start with a thorough physical, including checking for a possible hormonal imbalance, which needs to be addressed if present
- teach relaxation techniques, allow frequent contacts with nature
- develop talents and encourage creativity
- use bibliotherapy
- encourage friendships
- use medication if needed to aid relaxation and ease anxiety

Diagnosis of OE – descriptive and differential

Descriptive:

- what is the constellation of OE – its main and supporting types?
- what are their origins (genetic/environmental)?
- what are the special talents and abilities, and the general intelligence level?
- what are the speed and direction (negative/positive) of the developmental changes caused by OE?

Differential:

1. socio-educational difficulties
2. neuroses and psychoneuroses
3. psychopathy or psychosis

Principles of mental hygiene in dealing with high OE gifted children at school

Teachers' preparation is crucial in understanding individual differences and counteracting stereotypical and undifferentiated approach to gifted (or any) students.

1. Be fair, patient and empathetic.
2. Accommodate asynchronous, often one-sided, development.
3. Be kind, accept and appreciate the child for who he is and who he is becoming.
4. Look for signs of creativity and positive development in children whose behaviors appear unusual, inconvenient and strange. Remember that **diagnostic labels are NOT people nor do they tell us about individual human beings.**
5. Facilitate contacts between children of similar abilities and sensitivity.
6. Enjoy your students – grow with them, remembering that the so-called balance and stabilization are contrary to creativity and development.

Theory of Positive Disintegration (TPD) contributions to understanding the gifted

- ties asynchrony, OE, creativity and advanced development
- reframes such frequently encountered characteristics of gifted individuals as intensity, perfectionism, vulnerability to stress and traumas in a developmentally positive light
- explains difficult social experiences of gifted and creative individuals as a result of a mismatch between a multilevel, multidimensional individual and her unilevel, one-dimensional environment
- gives meaning to our suffering by showing its developmentally positive value
- instills hope that during the process of personality development through positive disintegration, the gifted individual will create her own rightful place in the world and thus transcend her loneliness and non-belonging

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