

## Dąbrowski Terms

There are many terms that are applied uniquely in the context of the theory of positive disintegration and if these terms are used outside this context, they are often seen as paradoxical, or they are misunderstood, or worse, they are seen as negative judgements. There are three basic categories: conventional terms used in a different and unique way. (e.g. adjustment, personality); older terms that are not currently common (e.g. psychoneuroses, dynamism); and terms that Dąbrowski coined himself that cover ideas he developed (e.g. positive disintegration, overexcitability). It can be fairly challenging to learn all of these terms but this reflects Dąbrowski—he was a complex thinker and developed a very complex theory. Here are some examples.

Adjustment—an articulated approach.

Dąbrowski differentiated four types of adjustment; two types of positive adjustment and two types of negative adjustment. These are easier to understand when divided into adjustment and maladjustment.

Traditionally, adjustment is perceived as conformity to, and the embracing of, the prevailing values and morality of one's society. However, Dąbrowski said that to be adjusted to a lower level, sick society is to also be sick. Dąbrowski refers to this as negative adjustment—to be well in step with a mixed-up, lower level society. On the other hand, positive adjustment is adjustment to the way a person or life ought to be—not the way it is.

Dąbrowski also described two types of maladjustment. The first, negative maladjustment, is what we traditionally think of as typical antisocial or criminal behaviour—violation of social mores for personal gains. The second, positive maladjustment, is a rejection of prevailing social norms based on the perception that they are somehow wrong, or unfair—nonconformity out of conscience. Positive maladjustment represents the conflict between what the individual sees ought to be, versus the way society and life actually is.

Ambitendencies and ambivalences.

In describing unilevel disintegration, Dąbrowski used two terms, the first, ambitendencies refers to equal drives between different choices on the same level. In ambitendencies, I am pulled to go left and I feel equally pulled to go right. The second term emphasizes that the equivalence of the choices that

creates feelings of ambivalence. Ambivalence describes the feeling of not seeing or feeling any differences between different choices, for example, going left feels the same as going right.

### Development.

Dąbrowski's approach to development was complex because he endorsed traditional approaches to explain the psychological development of some traits, but also described unconventional developmental mechanisms for other traits.

Traditional approaches to development are ontogenetic and emphasize ontogenesis, the unfolding of a stepwise series of stages, gradually leading from simple to more complex levels and forms. For example, Piaget described four stages of cognitive development: the sensorimotor stage, preoperational stage, concrete operations and formal operations. Normal cognitive development follows these stages in sequence. Each stage is defined in a time-specific manner and new stages are based upon, and emerge from, earlier forms. Dąbrowski endorsed these approaches to cognitive development.

However, Dąbrowski also described aspects of development that he believed were nonontogenetic, including emotional development and the third factor. These features do not emerge from earlier stages or levels. For example, Dąbrowski said one's level of emotional functioning does not automatically arise in the normal course of ontogenetic stages but emerges as a function of other, nonontogenetic conditions. These "other" conditions simply appear in the course of development. This approach gives the theory a somewhat metaphysical element. One implication is that while everyone will display ontogenetic stages, not everyone will display nonontogenetic features (e.g., not all will have third factor or emotion as Dąbrowski uses the term).

Dąbrowski also differentiated two qualitatively different types of mental life and development: the heteronomous versus the autonomous. The heteronomous is determined by biological or social/environmental factors and falls within conventional ontogenetic development. Autonomous development, reflecting advanced development, is self-conscious, self-determined, and self-controlled. Autonomous development emerges from more complicated, "other" nonontogenetic sources. Autonomous mental development involves "new forces" of self-determination and autonomy [largely third factor] that transcend normal biological and social determinants. Dąbrowski said that autonomous

development is the passing from lower level structures and functions to higher levels as the result of the process of positive disintegration.

In describing development, Dąbrowski also emphasized a balanced approach including both cognitive and emotional aspects. He observed that in many cases, development is skewed toward cognitive accomplishments. He called this one-sided development: development that is limited to one talent or ability, or to a narrow range of abilities and mental functions.

#### Developmental potential.

As Dąbrowski described it, developmental potential is a constellation of features and forces including: overexcitability, the three factors of development, the third factor, special abilities and talents, instincts, dynamisms and psychoneuroses. He said that developmental potential can be most easily assessed on the basis of overexcitability, special abilities and talents, and autonomous factors, primarily, the third factor.

Dąbrowski emphasized the role of the three factors and said that developmental potential is the relative interaction between the three; between the biological, the external (family and social) and autonomous, internal factors.

Developmental potential is genetic and sets the parameters for the ultimate development of the individual. In the theory of positive disintegration, the strong developmental potentials necessary to achieve the higher levels of development are not seen in the majority of individuals.

#### Dynamisms

Dynamism is an old term, usually associated with psychodynamic theories (e.g. psychoanalysis). Dąbrowski defined dynamisms as comprised of instincts, drives and intellectual processes combined with emotions. Dynamisms are biological or mental forces controlling behavior and its development. Dąbrowski described some 20 dynamisms covering a variety of developmental features.

#### Education and self-education.

Dąbrowski compared traditional education, especially in America, to animal training. He said that individual development must involve self-education (education of oneself) and include a balance between the intellectual, special

abilities and talents, and developing insight into one's unique essence and emotions. Self-education is a critical part of autopsychotherapy.

Emotions (a.k.a. values) direct development.

One of the most basic aspects of the theory of positive disintegration is the idea that one must get a sense of direction in life by becoming aware of one's feelings and emotions. Dąbrowski said that in a multilevel perception of life, emotions are the key rudder, providing direction to one's cognitive abilities. At its most basic level, when faced with a choice in life, the valence of one's emotions will draw one toward the correct solution and push one away from the wrong solution. One feels good in making the correct choices, given the situation and one's essence. In psychology this is usually called approach—avoidance motivation.

Hierarchization and value development.

To paraphrase Dąbrowski, life and humanization only begins when the hierarchization of values begins—without hierarchization, life is merely “ordinary.” Hierarchization acts as a developmental process through the discovery and activation of different, higher, emotional levels. To fully appreciate this process, it is important to recognize that Dąbrowski viewed emotions and values synonymously. Development is associated with the differentiation of higher from lower emotions and values. Dąbrowski said one's unique hierarchy of higher and lower levels of emotions and values reflects the essence of the individual's character.

Hierarchization is driven by psychoneurotic experiences as they disturb and draw attention to the lower levels of values. This helps an individual to gradually become aware of the shortcomings of lower values—external values adopted without much critical thought from social convention. The individual begins to imagine higher solutions and internal values reflecting one's unique essence. One's inner life eventually shifts toward the level of higher emotions. As these higher emotions become conscious, more frequent and more strongly experienced, they begin to direct one's behavior and raise it to a higher level. By equating values with emotions, Dąbrowski also linked values to dynamisms as emotions are a key part of the dynamisms.

Internal versus external environments

Dąbrowski differentiated the internal mental or psychic environment, the inner

psychic milieu, from external social environments.

#### Levels of functions.

The theory assumes that through observation one can describe qualitative and quantitative differences in mental functions that result from, and reflect, developmental changes. Dąbrowski described two types of reality; unilevel and multilevel. Unilevel reality is characterized by adjustment to what is, to egocentric enjoyment of life without deep consideration of others, to homogeneity and imitation, and where intelligence is used in the service of primitive instincts and social quests—to rise to the top of the company.

Multilevel perceptions of reality shift from a quantitative focus to an appreciation of new, qualitative features that distinguish the higher from the lower. This shift creates comparisons of lower realities versus higher possibilities, both in seeing one's self and in viewing life. When higher possibilities are perceived, a hierarchy develops highlighting lower versus higher aspects. Awareness of higher dimensions is based upon sensory perception, imagination, intellect, intuitive and emotional functions. Overexcitability is a driving force in seeing a multilevel reality.

#### Mental health and mental illness.

Dąbrowski presented somewhat unique approaches to defining mental health and illness. He said that mental health was development towards higher levels of mental functions, towards the discovery and realization of higher cognitive, moral, social, and aesthetic values and their organization into a hierarchy in accordance with one's unique authentic personality ideal. On the other hand, mental illness was defined as the absence or deficiency of processes that lead to authentic development; either a strongly integrated, primitive/psychopathic structure, or a negative, non-developmental disintegration which may end in psychosis or suicide. In this context, the average person is not mentally healthy.

#### Overexcitability.

The expression of overexcitability is commonly misunderstood in medicine, psychiatry and psychology, and in educational settings. Traditional approaches try to ameliorate or mitigate overexcitability. For example, even in Aron's approach to the highly sensitive person, overstimulation is seen as a negative experience that needs to be tightly reined in.

Dąbrowski described five main forms of overexcitability: psychomotor, sensual, imaginal, intellectual and emotional. Ideal development involves a combination of the expression of all five forms. Intellectual overexcitability is not high IQ; it is a passion for learning. Dąbrowski described imaginal, intellectual and emotional as the three types critical for driving higher level development. As higher development occurs, psychomotor and sensual forms are transformed into the service of the other three.

Overexcitability, in general, plays a different role during the disintegrative phases compared to its role in advanced development. As well, each of the five different overexcitabilities in the theory has several different contexts depending upon one's developmental level. For example, emotional overexcitability at level I vastly differs from emotional overexcitability at levels III or IV. Dąbrowski used the terms overexcitability and nervousness synonymously.

#### Personality versus individuality.

Dąbrowski used a unique definition of personality and concluded that personality is an achievement that is seldom attained (a nonontogenetic feature). This leads to the counterintuitive conclusion that the average person does not have a personality. Dąbrowski differentiated individuality from personality and said that we all have individuality but, given his definition, few people develop and differentiate their unique self enough to justify using the term personality.

Dąbrowski defined personality as the self-aware, self-chosen, self-affirmed, and self-determined unity of essential individual psychic qualities. Personality appears at the level of secondary integration (Level V).

Linked to the definition of personality is an individual's personal image of idealized development. Dąbrowski said that a person will develop an image based on features "more like" versus "less like" his or her fundamental essence. This personality ideal is an individual standard against which one evaluates one's actual personality structure. It arises out of one's experience and development. It is shaped autonomously and authentically and often is in conflict with the prevalent ideals of society.

#### Philosophical approach.

Dąbrowski used an unusual and unique philosophical approach that emphasized the contributions of both essence (Plato, Aristotle) and choice

(existentialism) in advanced development. Dąbrowski called this the existentio-essentialist compound. Usually, essentialist and existential approaches are differentiated in philosophy and presented as separate entities. Dąbrowski said the essence that one is born with is primary but this essence cannot be fully realized without making day-to-day existential choices (personality shaping).

### Positive Disintegration

Dąbrowski studied the lives of individuals he judged to exhibit advanced personality development and concluded that crises were a ubiquitous feature—the lives of these exemplars often involved great tragedy and suffering.

Dąbrowski believed that suffering gives us perspective and allows us to develop empathy and compassion, both for ourselves, and for others. He concluded that suffering helps us become authentically human and is a necessary part of life and genuine psychological development.

Dąbrowski developed positive disintegration to describe growth outcomes after experiencing adversity. Dąbrowski concluded one must experience crises and disintegration of existing personality structures in order to allow one to reconsider and restructure the self.

Positive disintegration promotes development beyond biological based influences (first factor), beyond social determination (second factor), and culminating in the emergence of third factor—self-determination. Dąbrowski also described negative disintegration, involving suicide or mental illness.

### Psychoneurosis.

Dąbrowski described psychoneuroses as essentially strong anxieties and depressions. Again, in the context of TPD, psychoneuroses are usually a positive feature and are defined as a necessary part of the development process. Dąbrowski said that personality development cannot be achieved without nervousness and psychoneurosis. He went on to say that it is in this way that such experiences as inner conflict, sadness, anxiety, obsession, depression and psychic tension all contribute to the promotion of one's authentic human development. Those especially trying moments of life are indispensable for the shaping of personality. Dąbrowski also differentiated internal conflicts (intraneurotic) from conflicts with others and with society (interneurotic).

### Psychopathy/psychopath.

Dąbrowski often referred to individuals at level I as psychopaths, using the terms primitive and psychopathic interchangeably. This was based on the view that psychopathy represents any genetically-based blockage (e.g., lack of development potential) that prevents full authentic development. This usage was not commonly known or popular in America and created a lot of confusion.

#### Psychotherapy and autopsychotherapy.

Dąbrowski endorsed traditional psychotherapy and pharmacological treatments of mental issues in individuals who display limited developmental potential. However, for individuals who display significant development potential, Dąbrowski advocated an approach emphasizing self therapy that he called autopsychotherapy. He encouraged individuals to use introspection to help understand their developmental potential and fundamentally unique essence. Through using autobiographical writing and techniques such as the imaginary mirrors (psychological and psychosocial), the individual can learn to manage his or her crises and development without relying upon the advice or perceptions of a therapist.

#### Third factor: the autonomous force.

Many people seem to reduce third factor to simple willpower but in fact, it is a lot more than that. Third factor is the basis of the development of an individual's unique autonomy. It involves the differentiation of oneself from one's larger social milieu (second factor) and encourages one to review one's instincts (first factor) and apply them in service of one's hierarchy of values. It is a strong motivation to become, and be, one's unique personality ideal.

#### Unilevel disintegration.

In describing unilevel disintegration, Dąbrowski emphasized that the alternatives perceived by the individual will be on the same level—hence the term unilevelness. Unilevel conflicts involve choices and alternatives on the same level. This type of disintegration cannot be developmental because there is no profound sense of higher versus lower choices—what Dąbrowski called multilevelness. By definition, development involves choosing higher over lower alternatives.