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Overexcitabilities and Sensitivities: Implications of Dabrowski's Theory of Positive Disintegration for Counseling the Gifted

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Exposure to Dabrowski's Theory of Positive Disintegration (TPD) often invokes strong reactions in gifted individuals and resonates with them on a personal level. The purpose of this article is to provide an overview of the theory and to discuss the integration of this theory into counselors' practice and understanding of clients.

Dabrowski's Theory – the Basics

Throughout the literature, Kazimierz Dabrowski's theory of positive disintegration has been alternately described as a theory of personality development, emotional development, and moral development. His theory grew out of his childhood experiences during World War I and his experiences as a Polish psychologist during and after World War II. In his work, he describes having seen examples of both the "lowest possible inhuman behavior, as well as acts of the highest human character" (Mendaglio, 2008). It was after this time that Dabrowski set out to create a theory to account for this wide range of human behavior and development (Tillier, 2006).

Much modern examination of Dabrowski's work has been in the exploration of the theory's relevance and application to gifted individuals, spearheaded by work done by Michael Piechowski, a close colleague and frequent collaborative author with Dabrowski on a number of works (Dabrowski & Piechowski, 1969, 1970, 1972, 1977, 1996). Piechowski (2003) states that "Giftedness is not a matter of degree but of a different quality of experiencing..." He, along with others in the field of gifted education believe that "gifted individuals experience the world from a different perspective, with qualitative differences including intensities, sensitivities, idealism, perceptiveness, overexcitabilities, asynchrony, complexity, introversion, perfectionism, and moral concerns" (Silverman, 2006). Dabrowski's theory thus offers a lens through which to conceptualize these qualitative differences.

Silverman (2006) discussed potential implications of Dabrowski's TPD as a new way of conceptualizing, defining, and identifying giftedness; as a framework for understanding, teaching and nurturing gifted individuals; and as informing new perspectives and counseling approaches for working with individuals dealing with the issues and challenges of giftedness. There have been a number of new publications (Mendaglio, 2008; Daniels & Piechowski, 2009) and studies underway (Amend, 2009; Mendaglio & Tillier, 2006; Mika, 2002; O'Connor, 2002; Pyryt, 2008; Tieso, 2007), particularly in the field of gifted education, that attempt to empirically examine and validate the application of this theory in working with the gifted population.

A Brief Overview of Dabrowski's TPD – Key Terms and Concepts

Dabrowski's TPD is developmental in nature and progresses along a continuum of five levels.

Summary of Dabrowskian Developmental Levels (adapted from Piechowski, 2003)

LEVEL I: PRIMARY INTEGRATION

- Individuals are governed by the “first factor” and are primarily influenced by heredity, impulses, and/or social, environmental forces.
- This level is marked by selfishness and egocentrism; individuals generally seek self-fulfillment above all through “ends justify the means” behavior.

LEVEL II: UNILEVEL DISINTEGRATION

- This level is characterized by a lack of inner direction, submission to the values of the group, relativism of values and beliefs, and the prevalence of ambivalences and ambitemencies.
- The “second factor” serves as the organizing principle of this level with social factors primary to the individual.

LEVEL III: MULTILEVEL DISINTEGRATION

- Within this level, individuals begin to get a sense of the ideal, of moral concerns, and of the existence of conflicting values within oneself.
- Individual's inner contrast between “what is” and “what ought to be” is responsible for the process of positive maladjustment that unfolds at level.

LEVEL IV: DIRECTED MULTILEVEL DISINTEGRATION

- The individual begins to move towards self-actualization and holds a strong sense of responsibility on behalf of others' well-being and inner growth.
- The “third force” becomes the primary motivator of growth, spurring individuals to work towards agreement between their actions and their ideals.

LEVEL V: SECONDARY INTEGRATION

- The “personality ideal” is achieved and individuals experience harmony and are at peace with themselves. Lower forms of motivation have been destroyed and are replaced by higher forms of empathy, autonomy, and authenticity.
-

A number of key terms and concepts must be introduced to fully grasp and understand the theory and its applications for the counseling field. Dabrowski's TPD first seeks to outline the *developmental potential* of an individual, defined by Dabrowski (1964) as the, "... original endowment determining the level to which an individual can develop, if his physical and social conditions are optimal..." He viewed this developmental potential as being composed of three factors. He viewed the first factor as an individual's genetic and permanent physical traits (e.g., intelligence, overexcitabilities, special talents, temperament, etc.), and the second factor as the social environment. He described the third factor as autonomous forces and processes, (e.g., consciousness, inner conflict, and self-determination), and viewed these as necessary components of creativity and advanced development.

Multilevelness is viewed as the division of human behavior and reality into different, multiple levels of developmental achievement, and as the result of the hierarchization of one's internal and external experiences (Dabrowski, 1970). This hierarchization is based upon a growing awareness of universal values and their roles in shaping personal growth.

Positive disintegration is the process during which the previously held personality structure must come apart in order to be replaced by higher-level personality structures. Dabrowski (1964) stated "the disintegration process, through loosening and even fragmenting the internal psychic environment, through conflicts within the internal environment and with the external environment, is the ground for the birth and development of a higher psychic structure" (pp. 5-6). He felt this process, while not always positive in its experience, was essential for the development of higher-level personality structures. This process may involve *positive maladjustment*, or "conflict with and rejection of those standards and attitudes of one's social environment which are incompatible with one's growing awareness of a higher scale of values which is developing as an inner imperative" (Dabrowski, 1972).

Dynamisms are biological or mental forces of a variety of kinds, scopes, and intensity, that are decisive with regard to behavior, activity, and personality growth (Tillier, 2006). These may include instincts, drives, and intellectual processes conjoined with emotions (Dabrowski, 1970), and vary according to level of development. At Dabrowski's TPD Level II, ambivalencies and ambitendencies (unilevel conflict), beginning of shame, temperamental adjustment, and extreme or changeable identification with others are the predominant dynamisms. Dynamisms at Level III are characterized by a hierarchization of inner conflict and development, disquietude with oneself, dissatisfaction with oneself, feelings of inferiority towards oneself, astonishment with oneself, shame and guilt, positive maladjustment, identification and empathy. At Level IV, the "third factor" is a central dynamism, along with inner psychic transformation, self-awareness, self-control, self-education, multilevel identification, self-acceptance, full empathy towards others, and creative instinct. Finally, at Level IV through Level V the dynamisms of empathy, responsibility, autonomy, authenticity, and the personality ideal become the driving developmental forces (Dabrowski & Piechowski, 1977).

Psychoneuroses were viewed by Dabrowski (1972) as syndromes of the process of positive disintegration and thus a necessary component of higher-level development. He saw psychoneuroses not as pathological, but as positive forces in mental development and symptoms of the disharmony and conflicts within both the inner psychic milieu and

with the external environment. Dabrowski (1972) felt a favorable hereditary endowment may enable individuals to accelerate development through positive disintegration towards a more cohesive personality ideal, however he acknowledged the possibility of both positive and negative manifestation and consequences dependent upon other factors of developmental potential.

Dabrowski (1972) defined *overexcitabilities* as “higher than average responsiveness to stimuli, manifested by either psychomotor, sensual, emotional, imaginal, or intellectual excitability” (p. 303). These overexcitabilities are the focus of much work being done with Dabrowski’s theory in the field of gifted education and are viewed by many researchers as a “multifaceted lens through which to view the intensities of gifted children” (Tieso, 2007). Further, these overexcitabilities are a “mode of understanding and responding to the world” (Piechowski, 1979) and a critical component of the qualitatively different way gifted individuals experience the world.

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 a means for more frequent interactions and a wider range of experiencing. (Dabrowski, 1972, p. 7)

More About Overexcitabilities

Piechowski is often credited for introducing Dabrowski’s theory, specifically the concept of overexcitabilities, to the field of gifted education as a better indicator of giftedness and creativity than traditional methods of identification (Piechowski, 1979). Thus, much research done in the field has followed exploring this avenue. Dabrowski’s theory and the concept of overexcitabilities were first demonstrated as a basis for counseling gifted clients in the late 1970s (Ogburn-Colangelo, 1979). These concepts are now considered fundamental to understanding the psychological aspects of giftedness (Silverman, 2008).

The strength of an overexcitability affects the quality of the person’s experience, “... the intensity must be understood as a qualitatively distinct characteristic” (Piechowski, 1991, p. 2). According to Piechowski and Colangelo (1984), overexcitabilities contribute significantly to one’s drive, experience, power to envision possibility, and the intensity and complexity of feeling involved in creative expression. These overexcitabilities represent the “kind of endowment that feeds, nourishes, enriches, empowers, and amplifies talent” (Piechowski & Colangelo, 1984, p. 87). A challenge for gifted individuals is that they can often be viewed negatively, or pathologically, particularly in educational settings. Dabrowski identified five forms of overexcitabilities: psychomotor, sensual, imaginal, intellectual, and emotional (Mendaglio, 2008). A summary of these overexcitabilities will highlight some of the positive and negative characteristics associated with each (adapted from Kane, 2008; Mika, 2002).

Psychomotor Overexcitabilities

- Surplus energy due to enhanced excitability of the neuromuscular system
- Manifestations:
 - Excess physical energy
 - Rapid speech and/or compulsive talking
 - Nervous habits
 - Impulsive actions
 - Marked competitiveness
 - “Workaholism”
 - Restlessness and/or constant fidgeting
 - Potential tendencies for self-mutilation
- *Psychomotor expression of emotional tension*
- In the classroom:
 - Pacers, fast talkers, tics (lick lips, hair twirlers), drum fingers, fall off chairs, chew on pencils
 - Recess is a necessity for such kids – without a physical outlet they have a difficult time settling down to focus on learning
 - May learn better with active, kinesthetic exercises, use of “fidget objects”

Sensual Overexcitabilities

- Heightened ability to experience sensory/ aesthetic pleasure
- Manifestations:
 - Increased need to touch & be touched
 - Delight in beautiful objects
 - Overeating
 - Aesthetic interests, Drama
 - Sensitivity to sensory stimuli (i.e., tags, noises, lights)
 - Need for comfort and luxury
 - Varied sexual experiences
 - Need for attention and company
 - Dislike of loneliness
 - May have numerous, but superficial, relationships
- *Transfer of emotional tension to sensual forms*
- In the classroom:
 - Highly sensitive to many things - textures, fluorescent lights, smells, etc.

Imagination Overexcitabilities

- Capacity to visualize events very well
- Manifestations:
 - Association of images and impressions
 - Inventiveness
 - Intuitive, heightened consciousness
 - Use of image and metaphor in verbal expression
 - Vivid and animated visualization
 - Less pure form: dreams, nightmares, mixing of truth & fiction, fears of unknown

- Intense living in the world of fantasy
- *Transfer of emotional tension through imagination*
- In the classroom:
 - Can be a fuzzy line between fantasy and reality for kids
 - May be highly intuitive – almost like ESP

Intellectual Overexcitabilities

- Intensified activity of the mind
- Manifestations:
 - Persistence to ask probing questions
 - Avidity for knowledge
 - Keen observation and analytical abilities
 - Capacity for intense concentration
 - Theoretical thinking and preoccupation with theoretical problems
 - Reverence for logic
- *Transfer of emotional tension through intellectual pursuits*
- In the classroom:
 - Voracious learners, can't ever get enough
 - Love puzzles and mysteries
 - May have a deep precision for understanding, intolerant of imprecision or errors

Emotional Overexcitabilities

- Function of experiencing emotional relationships
- Manifestations:
 - Strong attachments to persons, living things, or places
 - Inhibition (Timidity and Shyness)
 - Excitation (Enthusiasm)
 - Strong affective memory
 - Concern with death
 - Fears, anxieties, and depressions
 - Feelings of loneliness
 - Need for security
 - Concern for others
 - Exclusive relationships
 - Difficulty adjusting to new environments
- *The basis for multilevel positive disintegration*
- In the classroom:
 - Deep sense of personal and social justice
 - Existential depression
 - Compassion and need to act upon perceived wrongs
 - Sense of responsibility
 - Feel and internalize others emotions

These overexcitabilities often appear early in life, are considered variables of temperament, and are innate strengths of the individual. They relate most closely to activity level, intensity of reaction, and threshold of responsiveness. In describing these characteristics, the term overexcitabilities was chosen to suggest this heightened means of

responding, experiencing, and behaving (Piechowski & Colangelo, 1984). Research has consistently found that gifted children and adults tend to have significantly higher emotional, intellectual, and imaginal overexcitabilities than the average population (Ackerman, 1997; Gallagher, 1986; Miller, Silverman, & Falk, 1994; Piechowski, 1986; Piechowski & Colangelo, 1984; Tieso, 2007). The question this leads us to is, “How might this impact the counseling needs of such individuals?”

Implications for Counseling

O’Connor (2002) summarized the need for understanding the unique experiences of gifted students in his statements that “... many gifted children experience high levels of intensity and sensitivity and may appear at odds with their peers. They may question their ‘normality’ or have it questioned by parents and teachers” (p. 51). This questioning of self in relation to others most certainly continues into adulthood as individuals attempt to make sense of their place in the world.

Mika (2005) notes that while these overexcitabilities propel inner development in some individuals, in others they may create tensions that are too difficult to absorb or resolve, and lead to serious psychological problems. Dabrowski (1964), himself, discussed the challenges these overexcitabilities present for an individual, explaining that on the one side, overexcitabilities can accelerate individual development; however, on the other, they can lead to the initial phase of neuroses and psychoneuroses. While this may potentially increase the developmental dynamics, it also brings dangers of tensions too great to absorb and unhealthy ‘negative’ disintegration as a possible result. Tieso (2007) highlights the need for researchers and practitioners to “examine these intensities and promote intervention strategies that will enhance students’ positive characteristics while teaching them to compensate for the negative” (p. 11).

A brief summary of relevant strategies that may assist counselors in working with students experiencing and exhibiting various overexcitabilities is described below.

Students coping with psychomotor overexcitabilities may benefit from finding appropriate outlets to release energy, learning how to implement various relaxation techniques into their daily routines, as well as physical therapy and sensory integration techniques to help mediate some of their excess psychomotor tendencies. In addition, medication may be useful to some individuals in preventing exhaustion, aiding with focus and concentration, and allowing them the time and space to develop self-control strategies (Mika, 2002). For individuals struggling with sensual overexcitabilities, counselors should assist these students in building self-control, and encourage self-reflection so that students are able to gain a greater awareness of potential triggers and responses. Physical therapy strategies, as well as sensory integration and desensitization techniques, can be integrated into intervention plans to help such students learn to cope with overwhelming stimuli.

For students exhibiting imaginal overexcitabilities, it is important to distinguish between creative energies in this direction versus more potentially negative and harmful tendencies (e.g., delusions, confabulations, etc.). Counselors should assist students in understanding differences between what is illusory and what is real, as well as steer imagination towards creativity rather than non-creative isolation (Mika, 2002). Students exhibiting intellectual overexcitabilities will need help in creating a balance

between their intellectual and other overexcitabilities, and counselors should be intentional in attending to emotional and moral developmental needs, as these are often overlooked for such students in academic settings. Students will need to learn strategies to help counteract over-intellectualization and counselors can assist in the fostering of empathy and creativity for such students (Mika, 2002).

Students experiencing emotional overexcitabilities can highly benefit from counselors who are knowledgeable of the unique social and emotional needs of gifted individuals. These students often need validation for who they are as individuals, as well as a supportive and understanding environment that nurtures the development of self-awareness and self-acceptance. Implementation of interventions such as bibliotherapy, cinematherapy, and instruction in relaxation techniques can be highly effective with these students (Mika, 2002). For students across the range of overexcitabilities, the use of reframing techniques can assist in helping individuals realize the positive aspects of overexcitabilities and mediate some of the negative implications perceived by themselves and others.

Summary

The Columbus Group (1991), a gathering of researchers and practitioners in the field of gifted education, proposed a new definition of giftedness that highlights the qualitatively different inner experiences and awareness of gifted individuals, stating, “the uniqueness of the gifted renders them particularly vulnerable and requires modifications in parenting, teaching and counseling in order for them to develop optimally.” This article presents an overview of Dabrowski’s theory of positive disintegration as one lens that can assist counselors in gaining a greater understanding of the experiences and needs of this population as they may pertain to the counseling relationship.

Ultimately, much as with other unique populations, counselors will need to develop greater awareness and understanding of this population to most effectively meet the needs of those individuals whom we serve. Counselors may be called upon to act in consultant or advocate roles for gifted students, as well as to work with these students individually or in groups. We, as counselors, need to begin to develop effective, empirically based intervention strategies for work with this population. Some work has been done in the development of group counseling curriculum aimed at promoting self-awareness, self-understanding, and acceptance (Strickland, 2000). Individual models have been outlined and proposed (Mendaglio & Peterson, 2007), yet there is still much work to be done.

How does Dabrowski’s theory of positive disintegration fit with our understanding of other developmental theories? How does this lens fit with an understanding of the individual? How might Dabrowski’s theory of positive disintegration be useful in conceptualizing work with students and clients? What are the potential uses for this perspective within other counseling theories and frameworks (e.g., narrative therapies, humanistic and person-centered approaches, strengths-based counseling approaches, or cognitive developmental frameworks)? What are the multicultural implications of Dabrowski’s theory? Many questions remain; this article seeks to spark an interest in expanding this research agenda beyond the field of gifted education into a broader counseling arena.

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