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# TEMPERMENT, EMOTIONAL DEVELOPEMENT AND DABROWSKI'S THEORY

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## Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to review the literature on temperament and early emotional development and relate that literature to Dabrowski's theory of adult emotional development. This literature demonstrates the utility of Dabrowski's perceptions and shows how previous research relates to our understanding of emotional development. In reviewing this literature I will discuss the following topics: temperament, primary discrete emotions, non-primary discrete emotions, complex emotions and the interaction of these with the environment for successive development. Throughout the presentation I shall use examples of the concepts with reference to gifted and talented individuals.

## Temperment

Gordon Allport distinguished temperament in the following way.

Temperment refers to the characteristic phenomenon of an individual's emotional nature, including his susceptibility to emotional stimulation, his customary strength and speed of response, the quality of his

prevailing mood, these phenomena being regarded as dependent on constitutional makeup, and therefore largely hereditary in origin (1937, p.54).

A more recent definition which preserves much of Allport's is "Temperment involves those dimensions of personality that are largely genetic or constitutional in origin, exist in most ages and in most societies, show some consistency across situations, and are relatively stable, at least within major developmental areas (Plomin, 1981, p. 269)."

As we explore the research in this area, the empirical examples which fit into these definitions are consistently examples of behavioral style. Thus the temperment literature is concerned with style as opposed to content of behavior, i.e. the how of behavior and not the what of behavior. At the simplest level we speak of a child as having an easy or difficult temperment when they are born. That is, their style of behavior is tempermentally different and individualistic; for example, the three-year-old child who will continue to look at books for hours and attempts to continue the activity after the parent says to stop.

Thomas and Chess (1977) proposed nine attributes of temperment or what they called behavioral style: activity level, rhythmicity, approach-withdrawal, adaptability, intensity of reaction, threshold of responsiveness, quality of mood, distractibility, and attention span/persistence.

## Overexcitabilities

In Dabrowski's Theory we speak of overexcitabilities. Definitionally, overexcitabilities (oe's) are the tendencies of individuals to over react to stimuli by adding an individual component to the stimuli. This individual component may be in one or more of five areas: psychomotor, sensual, imaginal, intellectual or emotional. These oe's are, in effect, the styles by which the individual processes and adds to the stimuli from the external world. The advantage of this conceptualization is that it allows us to understand the differences between individuals not only in terms of intensity of their reaction but also in terms of the manner or style of their reaction. Such a conceptualization has immediate benefit for understanding gifted and talented individuals. Thus the athletically talented individual should show heightened psychomotor overexcitability, the musically or artistically talented should show a heightened imaginal oe, and the intellectually gifted should show a heightened intellectual oe. As the research presented here and elsewhere demonstrates, these are in fact the characteristics we find among these groups. Overexcitabilities, like temperament, are constitutional dimensions of the individual, which are consistent across situations, are relatively stable and indicate the style of behavior.

To attain higher levels of adult emotional development requires that the individual have at least a high degree of

emotional be in addition to any of the others, but this is getting ahead of our story. Being born with an be, or set of be's the individual enters the world in a unique way. This unique quality must interact with the world and the others in that world; starting with the primary caregiver, the family, the school and peers. The quality of that world which becomes most important is the goodness of fit between the individual's be's and the environment.

The temperament literature clearly emphasizes this point; it is the interaction between the environment and the unique temperament of the individual which accounts for predictable behavior (Goldsmith and Campos, 1981; Lerner and Lerner, 1982; Plomin, 1981; and Thomas and Chess, 1980). This interaction is of a special kind known as goodness of fit. We can understand this concept in terms of gifted education. What we have come to recognize is that gifted children need a different learning environment, one in which the child is encouraged to learn on his own, where projects are tailored to his own interests and inclinations. The failure to fit the environment to the child and attempts to fit the child to the environment frequently lead to a frustrated and non-accomplishing gifted child. Frustration is an emotional experience, and like other emotional experiences, results from a poor fit between the temperament or overexcitability of the child and the environment.

## Primary Discrete Emotions

This brings us to our next topic the development of the primary discrete emotions. There are seven to ten of these emotions and they are developed by 24 months of age. Eight of these have been consistently defined in the literature: fear, joy, anger, sadness, disgust, interest, surprise and contempt (Malatesta, 1981, 147). Seven have been found to have facial patterns which are universally, i.e. cross-culturally identical: surprise, happiness, fear, sadness, anger, disgust, and pain (Klinnert, et al. 1982: 9). These emotions then arise out of the interaction between the environment and the temperament of the child. The better the goodness of fit between these two the more positive emotions will be elicited and the poorer the goodness of fit the more negative emotions will be elicited. Naturally, by 24 months of age all of the emotions will be experienced, but the predominance of positive or negative emotions will produce different personality outcomes.

With the emergence of the primary discrete emotions, the infant begins to respond and act differently in his world. This is because emotions serve several functions. First, emotions structure cognitions. Second, emotions motivate behavior through the internal feeling states which are a part of the emotional experience. Third, emotions, together with cognitions, regulate behavior both internally and socially. Emotional reactions to situations effect the way in which those situations are perceived and thus direct-

ly effects learning and subsequent cognitions. Emotions bring about or motivate specific behavior patterns; and, in the area of primary discrete emotions, the behavior has attached to it external social signals which have been shown to be cross-culturally recognizable (Izard, 1971). These external signals regulate social behavior in as much as the perceiver's response is determined. For example, when a person is in pain we perceive the facial expression associated with it and respond with either nurturance or in extreme cases with avoidance.

#### Non-primary Discrete Emotions

As the child continues to age, not only does the temperament of the child continue to interact with the environment, but so do the primary discrete emotions. Once again the nature of this interaction is goodness of fit. It is out of this interaction that the non-primary discrete emotions begin to develop. These non-primary discrete emotions include pride, shame, love, and guilt. We know less about the development of these emotions but we do know some things. First, these emotions tend to develop during the fifth through the eleventh year of life. As part of the development, the external signal or signification of the emotions tends to be socialized by the specific culture, including the suppression of expression. At first during this period, children do not understand that other individuals can feel two emotions at the same time. Later the child can

appreciate that a person can have two or more emotions, but the child can only conceive of these as being held one at a time or sequentially. It is not until the age of nine or ten that a child can understand that another may hold two opposite emotions at the same time e.g. love and anger (Harter, 1979).

### Complex Emotions

As Inkeles (1969) has pointed out by the age of eleven a person has developed 50 percent of his or her adult vocabulary but has just begun to develop socially relevant skills. With the development of the non-primary discrete emotions all three elements; temperament, primary discrete, and discrete emotions, interact with the environment. It is through this goodness of fit that the complex emotions begin to arise. The complex emotions are relational in nature and involve the mixing of discrete emotions into complex feeling states such as depression, anxiety and empathy. Complex emotions involve a judgemental component and frequently are referred to as values or value judgments. It is at this level that Dabrowski's theory becomes especially important in describing adult emotional development.

All emotions, primary discrete, discrete, and complex; share several important elements. First, along with temperament, they interact with the environment in a goodness of fit manner for further development. Second, there is an internal feeling state associated with all emotions. Third,

these internal feeling states serve to structure cognitions. Fourth, emotions motivate and regulate both internal and social behavior through the signification or external expression of the emotion. And finally, emotions involve relationships with others as well as relationships with the internalized other or self.

#### The Temporal Development of Emotions

The emotional development sequence which I have put together from the various literatures may have overlap between the stages. For gifted and talented individuals the ages at which these stages occur may be earlier. In the later stages the age range is intended to be suggestive rather than definite. The stages I am proposing are as follow. First, each individual is born with a constitutional style of behavior known as their temperment or overexcitabilities. Second, every individual is born into an environment and the goodness of fit between the environment and the temperment leads to the degree of positive or negative primary discrete emotions. Third, the primary discrete emotions, such as fear, joy and anger, develop during the first through the twenty-fourth months of life. Fourth, the non-primary discrete emotions, such as love or guilt, develop between the age of three and eight years. Fifth, the integration of emotions or the ability to have mixed emotions develops between the ages of 9 to 11 years. Sixth, the development of complex emotions, such as depression or empathy, develops



between the ages of 12 to probably 20 or so years. Seventh, the development of value judgments as an integrating factor for the more banal emotions begins to develop around fifteen years of age and may or may not continue through the rest of life. It is this latter development to which Dabrowski's theory speaks.

### Conclusion

At the higher level of complex emotional development we use other words to describe the phenomenon. Some have called it moral development, others judgmental development, and still others social-cognitive development. In Dabrowski's theory we refer to it as emotional development because like all of the other emotions, the phenomenon structures cognitions and motivates behavior. Many people do not move beyond the first or second level in Dabrowski's theory, but the theory possesses a positive possibility for more development. Given the individual's overexcitabilities, we may manipulate the environment to create faster and more positive emotional experiences. Such an environment may foster greater autonomy in the individual, including the recognition of the importance of creating an environment which encourages others autonomy.

As Riesman said in The Lonely Crowd (1961:307), we need a new social character which recognizes that "men are created different; they lose their social freedom and their individual autonomy in seeking to become like each other."

Dabrowski's theory notes that beyond temperament or overexcitabilities and the goodness of fit with the environment emotional development requires the development of autonomy.

One hopeful sign for this kind of development is gifted education. Nowhere else do we see such a recognition of individual differences and the necessity of changing the environment to increase the goodness of fit between the individual and the environment. This must also be a stimulation for autonomy and increased emotional development. For those who wonder where our moral leadership will come from perhaps we now have some answers vis. in the emotional development of our world.

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