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THE THERAPEUTIC APPLICATION OF DABROWSKI'S THEORY
WITH GIFTED CLIENTS

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the therapeutic application of "Dabrowski's Theory of Emotional Development." The theory is composed of two parts: The Overexcitabilities and the Levels of Development. It identifies the therapist's view and practice of psychotherapy using case material.

A major theme is both the psychotherapist's and client's journey towards multilevel development.

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THE THERAPEUTIC APPLICATION OF DABROWSKI'S THEORY
OF EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT WITH GIFTED CLIENTS

by

ELEANOR R. FISHER

As a psychotherapist for more than 20 years, I have been intensely involved in observing the struggles of my patients in defining their lives. These struggles have frequently been torturous. Each person has their own path to follow.

My practice includes individuals, couples, group therapy, training of therapists and consulting to businesses.

When I first became aware of Dabrowski's Theory, I felt as if I had come home. I recognized what I had been instinctively practicing as a psychotherapist/teacher. Dabrowski's Theory immediately helped me to conceptualize my work within a framework that clarified the processes of growth, search, breakdown, conflict and the burning desire of individuals to transform hatred into peace and love. Using Dabrowski's Theories of Emotional Development and noting the degrees of Overexcitabilities has enabled me to redefine my definition of psychotherapy.

My current view and practice of psychotherapy is of a mutual journey accompanying each person with whom I work. Long ago I knew that the journey towards their transforma-

tion would be my journey, as well. Dabrowski says, "For developmental potential to occur it must be actualized in a favorable environment" (Dabrowski and Piechowski, 1977). To me, this means returning to the beginning, through all of the self-protective structures to find each person's level of development. To identify and value their survival. To elucidate with them their existential angst and to assure them that they are no longer alone in their journey towards transformation.

As a psychotherapist, this is the greatest privilege. Each step with each person is an opportunity for the therapist to continue the necessary work towards their own multilevel development. However, there is no choice. The drive towards transformation of the therapist and the clear recollection of her youthful struggles causes the commitment to guiding others on their way to multilevel development to be unfaltering, although, at times, personally painful. For those who have been trained to work with the gifted can relate to the possibility of turning personal negativity and alienation into peace and love.

To specifically address the theme of authenticity through therapeutic application, it is important to posit a philosophy of psychotherapy which is alive and grows. It evolves with each individual and has as its goal

personal transformation for the greater good of the world. The psychotherapist may reach into the soul of the clients through her soul for the purpose of development and healing, always mindful of the goal of transformation. I call that emotional communication. As the client grows less self centered, the psychotherapist opens additional space mirroring the client's experience. The path grows wider and more possibilities for movement are seen and experienced.

To illustrate the therapeutic applications with my gifted clients, I will focus on guidelines using Dabrowski's Theory of Emotional Development and degrees of Overexcitabilities. I will illustrate five major issues which correspond to the Levels of Development through case presentation (Tables 1 and 2).

These issues are:

1. Enlightened self-identity/definition
2. Enlightened self-appreciation
3. Enlightened self-enhancement
4. Enlightened self-affirmation
5. Service not servitude

When I first met Deborah, she was twenty nine years old. My impression of her was an attractive woman who was self-contained, beautifully groomed and carefully articulate. Her most striking feature was her intense

blue eyes which focused on me in a piercing manner. I asked, "What brought you to me and how can I help you?" She replied that she had seen three or four therapists over the last nine years in an effort to get help to find out who she was. Her experiences with psychotherapy previously were that therapists attempted to "help her fit into society by curing her of her disease through eradicating dissatisfactions with the status quo." She was told she could enjoy her talents as a sideline, however her main struggle in life would be to fight her dissatisfactions and keep her mouth shut, except on a selected basis, otherwise she would end up a lonely and bitter old woman, self-alienated from society and its comforts. As she spoke, her eyes welled up. I asked her, "What am I doing that caused you to feel so sad?" Her facade began to crumble as she continued, and the beautifully groomed woman began to disappear. I heard a small, young voice reply, "I've been trying to do that for years, since I was seven years old and my mother left me through an emotional breakdown. It was at that point that I knew without question my childhood was over. I think a part of me has been in mourning and rebellion ever since. Other therapists have tried hard to convince me to leave my mourning and rebellion behind--just transcend it. There's been no helpful suggestions to replace these

feelings--no way, just continue to be an imposter and pass away my time. What am I going to do with my mind? My soul? I'm here to see if you can help me identify who I really am. I've always known I'm different. Why do I have to feel guilty and ashamed of it. There's been no one to confide in. I've had help developing my talents, yet, no one wants to hear about my anxiety except to say 'rise above it.'

I told her she had come to the right place. I knew what she was talking about and asked if she had ever had an idea that she was gifted. In that young, small, voice, Deborah whispered, "Yes, I always had the idea, but I've felt too intimidated to talk about it."

I assured her that what she told me was appropriate for gifted people and asked if she would like to begin a journey with me defining who she was within that paradigm.

She began sobbing on hearing my words. It was as if all the years of feeling abnormal, never fitting in, and fear of an emotional breakdown such as her mother suffered were now about to end. As her tears subsided, she began smiling and speaking. She repeated over and over, "I am no longer alone." I repeated after her, "You are no longer alone."

Dabrowski's Theory at Level I speaks of the largest

group whose environments have not been conducive to higher level development. "The main determinant of higher level developmental potential being an inborn function. Developmental potential is insufficient by itself and must be actualized in a favorable environment. The environment can inhibit development considerably" (Dabrowski and Piechowski, 1977). I have observed that the right therapist can help the patient to create a favorable environment where higher level development may be actualized. The journey always involves the therapist and patient equally. I suggest that their successful bonding within the therapeutic milieu enables the patient to recognize the loving support which has been missing from her life. By knowingly creating the environment for growth, the levels of transformation may proceed.

What was taking place was Deborah beginning Dabrowski's Positive Disintegration. Because she felt understood, the tension and intensity of her defenses began to crumble. She had finally found a psychotherapist who was compassionate and knew how to be with Deborah in the process of transformation.

Deborah grew up in a multi-generational family where she was "left to find her own way." She had adequate food, clothing and shelter. Her father emphasized the importance of education and because both parents worked

she was sent to a nursery school at age two and kindergarten at age three, where she learned to read. Because she was so lonely, she quickly learned that her talent for reading better than others would gain her the admiration of her teacher. She feels this was the origin of her competitive drive and caused her to be attracted to "success, power and fame." She remembered being unconcerned that other children cried when she was held up as the example of the best student.

At this time, Deborah was less than five years old. We note that she, "had an idea that by excelling in reading she could get the approval and attention which she craved." She remembered that at the age of three, she started visualizing pictures in her mind of how to behave to get what she wanted. Having skipped the first grade and entering the second grade at age 5, she felt distressed at being singled out as the smartest child. The pictures she saw in her mind's eye of other children feeling badly at her expense made her "cringe, feel guilty and ashamed." She unskillfully tried to mask her talents, interests and great energies. When Deborah was not on guard she was very enthusiastic about her artwork, theatrical abilities and "figuring things out dimensionally." At first, the other children in school admired her over-excitabilities, and then, became frightened by her

intensity and withdrew. Quickly, she learned that fitting in with her peers meant, "acting silly, not asking serious questions and giving up her natural leadership abilities." When she reached the tenth grade in high school at age thirteen, her peer group had begun dating. She liked boys and also began dating. She and the boys in high school did not get along, "as she found them too immature and they found her a show-off."

Deborah reported that by the time she graduated from high school, the youngest in her state, she was thoroughly confused as to her identity. She would have to stop denying that she was the same as everyone else. Whenever she tried to blend in, she failed. They knew she was different. At that time in her life, she stopped trying to become anonymous. She accepted her gifts and began to acknowledge that her life had a different meaning than others. She did not know who she was. She knew she was multifaceted to a high degree, yet years of attempting to disguise herself caused her to feel anxious and inferior to others. At the same time, she masked her self doubts in self assurance and serenity. Concurrently, her secret agenda was to find herself. She had always struggled with what was right and fair in the world and knew these issues were related to her experiences.

When she was seventeen, she dropped out of her

freshman year in college to get married, have children and attempt to create an environment which was conducive to higher level development. This she did after considering that from her past experience she had no other alternative. Her son was born when she was eighteen and her daughter when she was nineteen. She adored them. Her husband was a good man and a loving father. She proceeded to help all of them grow up to the best of her ability.

Three years after her marriage, she realized she chose the wrong husband and determined that her children would not suffer because of this. She felt she owed them a well-functioning, loving family where they could feel secure and their home environment would support higher levels of development. At the same time, she recalled her father saying to her, "Princess, you can do anything if you study and work hard enough." She knew she could not be self-sacrificing like her father, so she enrolled in college again and began the process of learning to study as an adult. Her children and dog went to classes with her; they spent school vacations together. She achieved academic scholarships and assistantships to pay for her education. Her energy and delight in their growth was boundless. She felt guilty when she wasn't with her children at all times.

If we study Dabrowski's Theory of Overexcitabilities, we understand how she formulated her plans. She fit into every category, feeling unable to manage, yet driven to look for answers. In the Psychomotor area, she felt "pressure for action" to create an environment where her family could grow lovingly and develop peacefully. Sensually, she loved classical music and the house was always filled with it. Mom and the kids made up songs and dances to the music. At age 23, she enrolled in night school and graduated as an interior designer. She filled her home with beautiful colors and the renderings of her designs and paintings. Before the children went to school she taught herself to sew and made and designed clothes for them. Intellectually, she was immersed in thinking, feeling and reacting to all the stimulation she created around her. Her entire life was rich in imagination and she played happily and creatively with her children and their friends "as they all grew up together." As a product of an emotional childhood, she was intensely sensitive and connected with others' feelings. Serious problems arose as a result of her marriage and birth of her children. Because of her youth, they merged together so strongly that individuation as adults has been difficult.

Deborah and I began 50 minute sessions twice a week. We determined together that she needed to define herself

as a total person, not the fragmented soul she had become.

As her psychotherapist, we resonated. She was every gifted child and adult I had ever read about and met. She had been reaching out with no one to notice and hear the silent cries for help. Her desire to become who she was evidenced itself in the torrential outpourings of her history, naivete, strivings and longings. We talked in great depth about her mother leaving her when she was seven years old and "how she lost herself as well."

"How could she model herself after a mother who wasn't there?" Deborah felt she lost her identity at this point. Thus, her confusion and self doubt as a gifted child was magnified. I assured her that she was lovable and capable of transcending her fear and anger. Acceptance of her mother's illness and father's infantilization of her would in time translate itself into inner peace.

Most of the first six months were spent with Deborah crying and talking. It was as if she was mourning for her childhood, letting the pain leave. One day she announced that, "she was through mourning and had forgiven her mother and father for abandoning her." Through this phase I worked with her on establishing her identity. She felt that by defining herself, this was her first step of empowerment. She flung up her arms in triumph one day as she walked into my office, "I don't need approval.

I'll never get it. I can be me."

Deborah spoke clearly now of her talents, gifts, love of her children, enthusiasm and concern for others. She was deeply grateful for the work we had done together, and wanted to know how she could identify and help others. I encouraged her to "think, feel, say everything to me and her path would become clear."

The questions I asked Deborah elicited valuable information. In writing this paper I transposed my notes to illustrate Dabrowski's Overexcitabilities.

I recommend this as an excellent tool in asking about specific points in each category as it caused a feeling of being understood.

THE OVEREXCITABILITIES

Psychomotor Overexcitability: "She loved absorbing it all, immediately. Loves playing ping pong and tennis. I want to do it now! to learn it now, to express everything now!" If it sounds interesting to her she becomes impulsive. She constantly bit her nails as a child.

Imaginational Overexcitability: She expressed herself through various mediums of arts and crafts and gardening. She prefers invention and fantasy to life and always has been able to visualize in detail years in advance. Her dreams have been detailed, planned and in color. Sometimes

she elaborates, still. Through self-hypnosis, she can recall the past and although fears the unknown is excited to try many things.

Sensual Overexcitability: There was no sensory pleasure she did not enjoy; none was of less importance than the other. When she was five years old her father taught her to cook and found food interesting and comforting. When she had extra money she was able to enjoy spending it on herself. It was difficult for her.

Intellectual Overexcitability: Deborah was always curious. She could concentrate intensely on three or four things in process; leave one and pick up another as if she had never left it. She loves reading various material and considers herself a life long learner. Her earliest years questioning herself led to introspection and through reading and acting, studying people. Accustomed to being alone, her intellectual efforts, theoretical and moral thinking kept her company.

Emotional Overexcitability: Deborah recalled always feeling intensely, even her body temperature is 97° so she feels different than others, physically. She is loyal to people and becomes attached to those with whom she has things in common. She stays in relationships too long, remembering her own rejections. In her search for mutual connections she overcame timidity, and anxieties, "to look

for inarticulated kindred souls."

Enlightened self appreciation was central to Deborah's ability to transcend from Level II to Level III. Her inability to appreciate herself with all her talents caused her to seek appreciation through the eyes of others. "If I am appreciated for what I give to others, or do, it's like I get to live another day. I made it. And if I'm not told I did a good job, I have to try harder." She enjoyed doing for others, yet she was insecure regarding her own neediness. We explored the list of her talents and the information they gave us as if we were talking about a third person. It was easier for Deborah to explore with me, "appreciating these characteristics as if they belonged to someone else." She spoke of them as "having a life of their own, which she was powerless to prevent surfacing." It was the surfacing of the Over-excitabilities which caused her to seek validation from others. As we finished our first year of Deborah's therapy, she was able to internalize my appreciation, and value her gifts, no longer actively seeking others' appreciation.

At this point, I invited her into one of my two therapy groups composed of four men and four women. The participants have been together from three to thirteen years, and many of them are at Level III. The purpose of

Deborah's entering group therapy was three-fold: 1) to enable her to learn authenticity from peers, 2) to see how those in Dabrowski's "Multilevel Development" would respond to her, and 3) to enable her to meet others facing the issues of Positive Disintegration and experience their journey with them.

Enlightened Self-Enhancement: When I asked Deborah what she thought enlightened self-enhancement meant, she smiled slightly and said, "I used to speak of it in terms of adornment, like the right color lipstick or the best coordinated outfit. But I was afraid to say that it was working towards becoming the best of myself. I felt ashamed that I couldn't tell the truth. Until I came to therapy here, a part of me felt terribly guilty and sick because I wasn't born a man. I didn't fit in with girls and women. They called me "too pushy." And when I tried to express my anger, no one could understand it. What was wrong with some man calling me honey or touching me or patronizing me?"

Therapeutically, I explored with Deborah every fear she had relating to authenticity, and enlightened self-enhancement. We constantly reviewed her thoughts and feelings relating to her giftedness. The inherent symbols manifesting themselves through this ongoing exploration were critical in the development of her personality. Her

earliest remembered fantasy was that of "smiling over a smiling sun who smiled over a smiling world." She determined that in making that fantasy come true she was defining her enlightened self-enhancement. Deborah identified her entrance into Level III through defining who she was, the knowledge that she was accepted and understood, viewing her gifts as her friends, not as Damocles' Sword, Deborah ceased fighting her development. She seemed to regress at this point into self-criticism, questioning her moral ideals. In fact, what was occurring was necessary; disintegration of old defenses so that integration was born at a higher level. I kept reassuring and encouraging her. She was not crazy, having a nervous breakdown or flights on a pink cloud. At the same time her relationships with others were getting better; less strained, more authentic. She became more tactful, humorous and non-manipulative. Instead of attempting to convince people, we spoke of acceptance with love and letting go with love. "She heard me dimensionally now; as if listening to me in the present, healing her wounds from the past and preparing for the future."

Enlightened Self-Affirmation: For Deborah, beginning a discussion of enlightened self-affirmation brought tears of joy to her eyes. "I never thought I'd get to this point in my life where I could declare that I could stand

on my own two feet without being a part of someone else's needs. When I was seven years old, and realized my childhood was over, my father told me that I was a big girl now and he needed me to take care of my mother. I heard that as a command and took it literally. However, a number of thoughts repeated themselves from then on:

- 1) Do I have to take care of others first before attending to my own identity?
- 2) I will struggle to become,
- 3) You may not kill me off. I deserve to live, love and be loved,
- and 4) Someday, I will celebrate my own life."

On hearing Deborah's recollections and ideas, it was evident to me that she was at a vulnerable place. Clearly, I needed to explore in detail what each of these statements reminded her of to help her distinguish between past and present. It was as if she was a butterfly emerging from a cocoon where her father placed her at seven years of age. Therapeutically, our explorations caused her to feel authentic. Her major fear in pursuing enlightened self-affirmation concerned giving up her role and view of herself as a "doer for others." She feared going to the other extreme, being seen as selfish and narcissistic. I encouraged Deborah to use her life as a laboratory and practice taking care of herself first. I assured her that this process, although foreign to her, would afford her further encouragement to become authentic by focusing

on what messages were being stimulated in her at present. Her pure inner voice would guide her to the truth. And when she had doubts, she need do nothing, and wait till our next session to discuss them.

She was getting a clearer vision of what she wanted to become, and to her surprise, the spiritual side of her was emerging. She hesitated talking to others about this, instead, began devouring food in an attempt to understand this part of herself.

She dreamed of "jumping for joy." Instead, she was often enraged, depressed and sullen which she manifested through attempting to control others through her intellect. Her repetition necessitated that she marry a man like her mother, causing her further feelings of shame. Deborah reported she usually knew clearly what she was doing. That her angers, ideas and talents always had a life of their own and no attempts at disguise succeeded for long.

Deborah was aware of our work in dissecting her behaviors and ridding herself of old defenses in favor of nurturing action. This was excruciating to her as the greatest rationale for her behavior was a well-developed, sophisticated defense system. She smiles when she recognizes herself attempting to control others now, as she has vowed to give this up.

Celebrating her own life meant clearly articulating

her ideals. She scrutinized herself constantly, striving to become harmonious with herself, people around her and nature. Although self-scrutiny always contained a painful element, she welcomes it knowing this was an integral part of her evolution. She was able to hear criticism from others, consider it, and differentiate between their perceptions of the truth and the truth itself.

Using Dabrowski's Model, Deborah has demonstrated that she is a gifted woman of multilevel development who seems capable of evolving to Level IV.

To this end, we are working on the fifth issue of Service Not Servitude. Deborah was raised to serve others. When she chose not to, she felt guilty and it was only after using tremendous energy to serve others that she would consider her own growth. She married, went to school, was raising a family and developing a successful career when I first met her. Service Not Servitude felt like total free choice with no "shoulds" implied. She could use her talents to evolve and be of service joyfully, with a full and overflowing heart. Deborah's vision is of searching for truth through using her abilities, gifts, and continuing to get to know and develop herself in whatever direction that may take her. She is afraid and excited at the prospect of her continued journey in disintegration for the purpose of integration.

My view of the therapeutic application for an evolving psychotherapist is to eagerly help each person in treatment shoulder their burdens and let them know they are on a journey where they are no longer alone. They must be helped to define themselves as unique beings. They must be provided with an atmosphere of safety and growth where they may feel understood and nurtured. They must know that there are no boundaries to their capabilities and most especially that a sound therapeutic relationship will take them as far as they are willing to go.

The benefits of developmental therapy to the psychotherapist are that each experience with a client causes her to contribute to healing personal wounds in the service of others. When personal wounds heal, positive energy and love take its place. When peace and love are magnified through therapeutic intervention the whole world will move toward this end.