

Chapter 20

Emotional Life and Psychotherapy of the Gifted in Light of Dabrowski's Theory

P. Susan Jackson, Vicky F. Moyle and Michael M. Piechowski

Abstract In this chapter we introduce the basic terms of Dabrowski's theory, review the themes of emotional life of the gifted, including emotional and spiritual giftedness, discuss psychotherapy for the gifted, and present two cases illustrating development through positive disintegration in exceptionally gifted young persons.

Keywords Developmental potential · Emotional intensity · Emotional sensitivity · Emotional giftedness · Psychotherapy · Multilevelness

Two Core Concepts: Developmental Potential and Multilevelness

Dabrowski's theory of positive disintegration was first introduced to the field of giftedness in 1979. Two chapters in *New Voices in Counseling the Gifted* presented the core concepts of the theory: developmental potential and multilevelness (Colangelo-Ogburn, 1979; Piechowski, 1979). By development Dabrowski meant personal growth much like scaling a mountain rather than the sequential unfolding of childhood, adolescence, and adulthood.

Imagining personal growth as ascent of a mountain, with all the peril, tests of courage and perseverance, suggests that not everyone has the strength, endurance, and determination to go far; few manage to reach the summit. Also not everyone is interested in

climbing and may prefer to remain in the valley. Some may not even be aware of the mountain. The endowment for how far in scaling the figurative mountain an individual can go constitutes developmental potential. An endowment for multilevel development signifies that a person starts already a significant distance up the slope. A person with limited potential starts in the valley and does not reach far. Multilevel development is a special kind of development involving introspection, self-evaluation and self-judgment, and significant inner conflict and suffering that constitute the work of inner transformation.

Dabrowski's theory introduced a concept of multilevelness, the idea that the extremes—for good and for bad—of human emotions, motivations, values, strivings, and behaviors will make more sense if looked at through a prism of levels. If, for instance, we take manifestations of joy we could see joy from winning a football game, feeling superior, defeating an opponent, succeeding by cunning, and feeling of power when cleverly manipulating others. But to many people such joys would be offensive because of complete lack of consideration for others. A different kind of joy is the joy that the name of a loved one brings, the joy of overcoming one's bad habits, the joy of self-discovery, the joy of a creative moment and inspiration, and the joy of being able to help another. In the first case, the experiences of joy are egocentric, self-serving, self-protecting, and power-seeking. In the second case, they arise from love and empathy toward others, from positive changes in oneself, and from expansive feelings of a higher order. The first case represents joy on a low emotional level; the second case represents joy on a high emotional level. This comparison can be extended to all emotions and behaviors (Dabrowski, 1970). It is quite possible for a young

M.M. Piechowski (✉)
Institute for Educational Advancement, South Pasadena,
CA, USA
e-mail: spirgif@earthlink.net

person to operate on a higher emotional level than a so-called mature adult.

The idea of levels comes from the experience of higher and lower in oneself. Failing a person in time of need is something lower, something we are ashamed of and feel guilty about. Helping a person without any expectation of reward or even token gratitude is something higher in ourselves, and all the purer if no one knows about it. The yardstick here is the nature of our intentions and motives.

Dabrowski envisioned five levels, which create four intermediate levels, thus nine in all (Table 20.1). The whole levels form a hierarchy: I, Primary integration; II, Unilevel disintegration; III, Spontaneous Multilevel Disintegration; IV, Organized Multilevel Disintegration; and V, Secondary Integration. The levels can be identified by values, feelings toward self, and feelings toward others that Miller used for her coding system (Miller, 1985; Miller & Silverman, 1987).

The five levels have been outlined numerous times (Dabrowski, 1970; Dabrowski & Piechowski, 1977; Miller & Silverman, 1987; Nelson, 1989; Piechowski, 1975, 1991, 2003; Silverman, 1993). The theory is very complex and no simplified version can give it justice. In Dabrowski's clinical practice, artists, actors, writers, religious persons, and gifted children were prominent. He also studied the lives of eminent creators. Consequently the theory addresses the personal characteristics and the subjective experience of the gifted. It draws attention to the role of emotions, imagination, and intellect in multilevel development. Besides research instruments, the theory offers new tools for differentiating gifted and non-gifted students (Ackerman, 1997) and of identifying gifted African-American students (Breard, 1994). The theory

also helps to understand the intensities and sensitivities driving creative people (Piiro, 2002; 2004; Piechowski, 1999).

The components of developmental potential (DP) are germane because they overlap with characteristics recognized in many gifted children and adults. Talent, specific abilities, and g (intelligence) constitute the first and the most obvious component. Overexcitabilities constitute the second component. They were readily embraced by the field because heightened excitability is what's noted about gifted children, their capacity to be intensely and greatly stimulated and stay stimulated for long. As far back as 1938, Dabrowski described five overexcitabilities and so far no additional ones have been suggested. Overexcitabilities may be viewed as the necessary—but not sufficient—raw material for multilevel development. Inner psychic transformation is the third component, and it encapsulates what multilevel development is about.

Developmental potential for multilevel development takes this form:

1. Talents, special abilities, and g (intelligence).
2. Overexcitability: psychomotor, sensual, intellectual, imaginal, and emotional.
3. Capacity for inner transformation.

Overexcitability means that reality is experienced in a *qualitatively* different manner. Not just more of curiosity, sensory enjoyment, imagination, and feeling but added dimensions of depth, texture, acuity, and perception. It implies an intense aliveness and a neural processing very different from the norm. The idea that high neural plasticity of the brain underlies giftedness may be relevant here (Kalbfleisch, this volume).

Gifted children, endowed with the capacity for advanced development, tend to be more active than regular children and display higher energy level, whether physical, intellectual, or emotional. Prodigies are examples of an extraordinary concentration of mental energy. The energy of the electric current in the nerve tissue becomes interest, passion, sustained effort, perseverance, creative flow, ecstasy, caring, compassion, or spiritual experience. A greater than average intensity, sometimes very great and extreme, results in experiencing life intensely. For example, "I get filled with energy when I need that energy. And, of course, I release it by doing the thing that got me excited in the first place" (Piechowski, 2006, p. 40). This surplus of energy Dabrowski called *psychomotor*

Table 20.1 Miller's criteria for assessment of levels of development

Level	Values	Feelings Toward self	Toward others
I	Self-serving	Egocentric	Superficial
I-II			
II	Stereotypical	Ambivalent	Adaptive
II-III			
III	Individual	Inner conflict	Interdependent
III-IV			
IV	Universal	Self-direction	Democratic
IV-V			
V	Transcendent	Peace and harmony	Communionistic (transpersonal)

Adapted from Miller (1985)

overexcitability because it has to be discharged in action. In three studies, psychomotor overexcitability differentiated between gifted and non-gifted students (Ackerman, 1997; Bouchard, 2004; Tieso, 2007).

Sensory experience for gifted children tends to be of a much richer quality because so much more detail, texture, contrast, and distinction are coming into awareness. What is pleasant is liked with a passion, what is unpleasant is disliked intensely. Dabrowski called it *sensual overexcitability*. For example: "I seem to notice more smells than a lot of other people. I love dark, musty smells and earthy smells, herbs and things like that. I love the smell of clean air in spring and tree blossoms and things and the smell of clean bodies, esp. hair" (Piechowski, 2006, p. 48). Sensual overexcitability may join with emotional overexcitability, as it often does, thus making the experience all the richer and more meaningful. For example, "I like yellow for it seems warm and full of joy" (Piechowski, 2006, p. 43). In an intimate relationship sensual and emotional elements cannot be teased apart.

Intellectual overexcitability is the characteristic by which gifted children are most often identified. In a happy turn of phrase, Frank (2006) said that intelligence is about the ability to solve problems, but overexcitability is about the passion for solving them. When the emotional and mental energies meet, the mind supplies the energy of sustained concentration while emotional energy drives interest (passion). Interest is one of the basic emotions (Izard, 1971).

Gifted children tend to have excitable *imagination*, especially rich, abundant, and surprising in creative individuals. Imagination is a vast subject and yet not sufficiently studied in gifted children. Creativity depends on it. Imagination in combination with *absorption* enables construction of new realities (more about this later).

Emotional overexcitability, manifested in the range of emotions and feelings, tends to be wide and multifaceted in gifted children, both in intensity and in sensitivity. Besides compassion, caring, and responsibility the significance of deep and perceptive feeling lies in *empathy as a way of knowing*, another unexplored ability of the gifted.

Gifted children are often misunderstood exactly because they can be so greatly stimulated and because they perceive and process things differently. Their excitement is viewed as excessive, their high energy as hyperactivity, their persistence as nagging, their

questioning as undermining authority, their imagination as not paying attention, their persistence as being disruptive, their strong emotions and sensitivity as immaturity, and their creativity and self-directedness as oppositional disorder. They are the wild tall poppies that many forces conspire to cut down to size (Gross, 1998).

Funneling of Emotional Tension

The concept of overexcitability suggests that the overall picture of an individual's personal energy is worth investigating. Certain situations impede the natural flow of this energy. For a naturally active person inactivity leads to a buildup of energy, which presses to be discharged. For a naturally active mind a boring day at school, or at a meeting, has to be worked off by engagement in an intensely absorbing mental task, otherwise sleep will not come (Tolan, 1994). Emotional tension also builds up energy which then seeks release in nervous habits, sensual easement of tension (e.g. drinking, eating, shopping, sex), or excessive worrying. Nervous habits and workaholism are a psychomotor way of funneling of emotional tension, oral compulsions are the sensual way (Piechowski, 2006).

Giftedness from Inside Out

The varieties of expressions of each overexcitability have been collected from open-ended questionnaires (Piechowski, 2006). Quantitative studies are good for group comparisons and general trends in the data, but it is the content of responses that reveals the quality of experience and features of emotional life (Piirto, 2004). Three different studies provided 158 OEQs (open-ended questions) with a total of about 5,000 responses from 79 boys and 79 girls, aged 9–19 years; the majority were teens (Piechowski, 1979; Piechowski & Colangelo, 1984; Piechowski & Miller, 1995). The first study used an OEQ with 46 questions, subsequently replaced by a 21-item open-ended OEQ. The expressions by which a given overexcitability is identified in the scoring process have been listed in a number of sources (Cline &

Schwartz, 1999; Piechowski, 1991; 2001; 2003; 2006; Silverman, 1993). The themes that emerged from review of the content of the responses give a fairly good picture of the many dimensions of inner life of gifted children and adolescents (Piechowski, 2006). A sampling of themes is presented in Table 20.2. Yoo and Moon (2006) developed a 47-item inventory of problems identified by parents of gifted children requiring counseling. Quite a few of the items in the inventory identify concerns similar to the themes listed in Table 20.2, for instance, hypersensitivity, anxiety and fearfulness, low self-esteem (self-doubt), pressure to meet expectations (burden of “the gift”), perfectionism, conflict with teachers or classmates, non-compliance (resistance to compulsion), depression, loss and grief (coping with death), and so on. Only a brief overview of selected topics can be presented here.

Intellectual Energy

The process of solving problems or trying to grasp difficult concepts typically can take one of two directions: a step-by-step progression of breaking the concept down, or by flash of insight that follows many shifting points of seemingly fruitless attack. The sudden insight is typified by Kékule’s discovery of the ring structure of the benzene molecule and by Einstein’s thought experiments. Today it comes under the rubric of spatial thinking or visual-spatial learning (Lubinski, 2003; Silverman, 2002). Spatial thinking, which is nothing short of amazing, depends on precise visualization, a link to imagination.

Intellectual energy has other consequences: relentless questioning, critical thinking, and evaluation. For instance, gifted adolescents responded to the question, *What gets your mind going?*, by mentioning the irresistible attraction of brain teasers, logical puzzles, theories, and controversies. More significantly, some have mentioned “challenging anything accepted by society” (not all were this radical) by equating such acceptance with conformity: “One good thing [is that] I try to think about my beliefs—political and religious—so that I won’t believe things just because my parents do” (Piechowski, 2006, p. 64). This may lead to a crisis in families with rather strict and orthodox religious faith or political adherence. A gifted adolescent

is likely to question the foundations of their faith and often will find it wanting. To a highly gifted young person doubts about beliefs present themselves almost inevitably, consequently they may precipitate a crisis of worldview.

The price of questioning can be twofold. One, in environments that do not value questioning one quickly meets with resistance and even rejection. Two, as self-questioning it may create self-doubt and the fear of going crazy: “I probably spend too much time thinking about my own thinking, analyzing myself and analyzing the analysis. I sometimes psych myself into thinking I am going crazy” (Piechowski, 2006, p. 63). It may be interesting to note that the great Sir Francis Galton tried thinking paranoidly and was startled how quickly he became paranoid.

Imaginal Experience

Commanding energy, sensual delights, racing thoughts, and ideas are, for the most part, known territory. With imagination a whole universe of unlimited possibilities opens up to us. Imaginal experience can be real and remembered as such, “as if it really happened.”

The subject of invisible friends (imaginary playmates) has not received much attention in gifted literature other than noting that gifted children tend to have many more such companions than other children (Terman, 1925; Hollingworth, 1942) and that creative adolescents often keep them from childhood (Davis, 2003; Piirto, 2004). That children distinguish pretend play from everyday reality has been long established (Singer, 1975; Singer & Singer, 1990). However, the role of invisible friends in social development, in gaining sense of competence and overcoming fears, though studied in regular children, has not received much attention in regard to gifted children (but see Root-Bernstein, this volume). Imaginary companions usually are not secret but they do belong to the child’s own world. Attempts on the part of adults to interact with them swiftly lead to their disappearance by natural or unnatural means (Taylor, 1999). Imaginary playmates are real to the child, and one may wonder whether the experience is accompanied by sensory feelings. The study of imaginary worlds answers this question.

Table 20.2 Emotional life of the gifted: A sampling of themes

Piechowski (2006)	Yoo & Moon (2006)
Intensity and sensitivity	Hypersensitivity
High personal energy—physical and mental	
Funneling of emotional tension:	
psychomotor: nervous habits	
sensual: eating, drinking, etc.	
intellectual: a mind that cannot slow down	
imaginal: doomsday scenarios	
emotional: excessive worrying, (expecting the worst)	
Sensual delights: appreciation increases with age	
Intellectual energy	
interest as a basic emotion	
the role of empathy in intellectual probing	
passion for finding and solving problems	
relentless questioning and its consequences:	
resistance in others, self-doubt in oneself	low self-esteem
testing assumptions and beliefs: adolescent	
crisis of worldview	
spatial thinking	
Imaginal experience	
is imagination valued or source of annoyance?	
imagistic thinking, e.g., metaphors	
precise visualization: spatial and vivid	
absorption: experiencing with full	
sensory engagement	
communication with nature	
invisible friends (aka imaginary companions)	
imaginary worlds	
how real is a self-created reality?	
Emotional experience	
emotional intensity as “too much”	
predominance of positive affect	
friendships transcend stereotypes	
affectional bonds with family, animals, and places	
the self in adolescence: elusive, fragmented,	
multiple, or confident	
sense of responsibility: the burden of “the gift”	pressure to meet expectations
being different	sense of being different
perfectionism	perfectionism
entelechy	
empathy and a calling to action	
empathy as a way of knowing	
triggers of conflict	conflict with teachers, fighting with
	peers
resistance to compulsion	noncompliance
anger, insecurity, and self-consciousness	anger/ frustration
coping with depression	depression
	isolation, loneliness
coping with fears	anxiety, fearfulness
coping with death	recent loss/ grief
	suicidal ideations
Typology of emotional growth	
rational altruistic (“judging” or J)	
emotional introspective (“perceptive” or P)	
Emotional giftedness	
the high end of emotional intelligence	
Spiritual giftedness	
facility for transpersonal experience	
Multilevel development	
unilevel vs. multilevel developmental process	

Cohen and MacKeith (1991) examined 64 accounts of imaginary worlds. The degree of elaboration—creation of histories, languages, multiple characters (in one case as many as 282), and the early age when they are begun (6 or 7 or even younger)—indicates the young weavers of these worlds were highly gifted. The experience of being in an imaginary world can be “as real as real.” For example, “I also had a magic boat in my youth for a while. It had an outboard motor but I found that too noisy. I’ve never been clever with engines and there were always problems about petrol, so I discarded the idea” (Cohen & MacKeith, 1991, p. 57).

“Imaginary” is usually taken to mean “not real.” But imaginary playmates and imaginary worlds are lived with the full range of sensory experience and memory. The brain appears to make little distinction between something that is vividly imagined from something that is experienced from an outside input to the senses (Damasio, 2003). Therefore, to allow for the “as real as real” quality of experience, a more fitting term is *imaginal* (Corbin, 1972; Singer, 1975; Watkins, 1990).

A study of excellent hypnotic subjects showed that a significant proportion of the population, between 2 and 4%, is quite at home in imaginal scenarios of their own making (Wilson & Barber, 1983; Lynne & Rhue, 1988; Singer, 1975). For the experience to feel completely real, vividness of visualization has to be accompanied by the ability to be completely absorbed in the experience. For example, to enter into a painting, become one with music, become water, sky, or an animal with all the attendant sensations and perceptions is to be totally and realistically merged in the experience (Piechowski, 2006; Tellegen & Atkinson, 1974). Such depth of absorption is more than flow because it takes place in a self-created reality. We are faced with the intriguing question of how imagination constructs reality. Since the internal, self-created reality cannot be distinguished from the properties of external reality, one has to ask, which is the real “real”? (Piechowski, 2006). The discovery of mirror neurons opens new possibilities for exploring the exact nature of imaginal experience as these neurons have links to the motor and sensory systems (Azziz-Zadeh, Wislon, Rizzolatti, & Iacoboni, 2006; Schütz-Bosbach, Mancini, Aglioti & Haggard, 2006; Turk, 2007).

Emotional Life

Emotional overexcitability is about what stimulates the person. It is further differentiated into emotional intensity and sensitivity. Emotional *sensitivity* represents the ability to perceive and respond to nuances of emotion and feeling in others, in oneself, and in group interactions. It may be so acute that it becomes hypersensitivity. Emotional *intensity* (passion) is about the amount of energy being expressed. With some people the intensity of their expression is so great that it can be felt like a pressure wave. Intensity of concentration and their passion for a subject or talent, distinguish gifted children; as one of them said: “A passion is something that rules your life. You want to know everything that there is to know and you want to be the best at it. An interest is something that is cool, and you would like to know more, but if you don’t that’s okay too” (Schultz & Delisle, 2006a, p. 90).

Emotional life of the gifted encompasses so much that only a few selected themes can be discussed (Table 20.2). In the responses to the OEQ positive feelings predominate. The dominant affect tends to be love, compassion, caring, optimism, appreciation of beauty, and the like. Bonds of deep affection involve parents and siblings, pets and favorite places, whether it is grandma’s house, an orchard, a spot by the river, or backstage of the school theater.

The role of contact with nature in our emotional well-being has received very little attention. With the worsening environmental condition of the planet and growing urbanization, the opportunity for children to spend time in nature and explore it has all but vanished (Louv, 2005).

Preadolescent younger children have much empathy for the natural world (cf. the case of Kieran in the last part of this chapter). They empathize with a wilting plant, a tree whose limb is cut off, a crushed spider, and rise in indignation against maltreatment of living things. We belittle it by calling it animism because we do not see the moral imagination of the child who identifies with what is living and seems sentient. This feeling is extended to stuffed animals or any objects of which the child is especially fond. Adults do that, too, when they identify with their car or a piece of jewelry (Piechowski, 2006).

Friendships are described in terms of intuitive connection and mutual understanding on a deep level.

Friendships transcend gender stereotypes and are as easily formed between boys and girls as between boys only or girls only. Introverted and non-athletic gifted youngsters have a particularly difficult time finding friends—they are a minority (non-athletic) within a minority (gifted), which can be further compounded by any degree of “geekiness.”

Being intense, which to most people means “too much,” also creates an obvious challenge of finding friends of similar level of intensity or passion. Being intense is an ineradicable part of the gifted self. When asked how they see their own self, some said that their self is unknown, elusive, or hidden; others described themselves in opposites. For example: “For every adjective I can think of there is one that contradicts it entirely: artistic but can’t write neatly (so you’ve seen), lovable, yet a bitch; shy but loud, mature but silly, calm but ‘spastic,’ together yet ready for a nervous breakdown” (Piechowski, 2006, p. 174). Struggles with self-doubt, low self-concept, and lack of self-acceptance are common. In adolescence the self is often changing and awareness of having many selves, or even being split into a thousand fragments, is not unusual. It is part of emotional growing and seeking, which may be intensified in adolescence and adulthood in the process of multilevel development.

Because of their awareness of a larger context, gifted adolescents may feel insignificant. But they can also feel predestined for their mission in life, an inner imperative called *entelechy* (Lovecky, 1990). In such cases the qualities of will and self-determination become prominent and clash with compulsory demands and authoritarian commands.

For gifted young people it is often not easy to admit being talented. The expectations of others for gifted children “to fulfill their potential” (as if one could know what that is) create pressure that is an unwelcome burden because already one of the outstanding dominant traits of most gifted young people is a feeling of responsibility. Expectations and pressures from others rob them of their own initiative only to make the responsibility weigh all the more heavily on their shoulders. They are well aware of it. The question, who owns “the gift,” is rarely considered (Clark, 2005).

The value of working for the common good is something gifted children understand readily. One teacher of the gifted said this about the difference in teaching gifted and regular students:

One thing I have not realized until I returned to the regular classroom was that gifted students’ heightened ability to perceive connections meant that I extensively used their empathy for others to teach broad concepts at a depth I find difficult to even start to address with my current classes. The empathy made the abstract very personal. Most of my current students cannot get beyond their own narrow world, and for some, not even beyond their skins. (Frank, 2006, p. 166)

Gifted children’s quick empathic response to the needs of others, their misfortunes, and tragedies has been well documented (Lewis, 1992; Lovecky, 1992; Piechowski, 2003; Roeper, 2007; Silverman, 1994; Waldman, 2001). The statement quoted above shows the gifted students’ capacity for *empathy as a way of knowing*.

The capacity for empathy as part of gifted children’s intellectual makeup is something that deserves more attention. We have come late upon the knowledge that rational thought is ineffectual without feeling (Damasio, 1994). In fact, social interaction and empathy depend on the activity of the mirror neurons, which create a simulation of the actions and the emotions of others within ourselves. A feelingful response is fast and operates on a precognitive level (Gazzola, Aziz-Zadeh, & Keysers, 2006).

Being gifted inevitably leads to conflict. Gifted adolescents described those who brag as insensitive and irresponsible. Clearly, these behaviors offend their empathy, caring, and sense of fairness. A frequently mentioned conflict arises with teachers who do not accept students’ views, their knowledge, and their questions, in short, teachers who do not show respect for their students (Piechowski, 2006; Schultz & Delisle, 2006a, 2006b). Being forced to act against one’s will raises *resistance to compulsion*, a much overlooked but very basic phenomenon (Seligman, 1975; Piechowski, 2006). Gifted students, and the creative ones especially, react very strongly and viscerally when they are denied choice and respect. Procrastination, refusal to work, as well as learning difficulties are born from this kind of resistance. Also being forced to adhere to a belief one has not chosen. The students then assert, by any means possible, their self, individual identity, right to be heard, respected, and given choice.

Anger, insecurity, and self-consciousness were listed as unwelcome negative feelings. Depression was expressed through vivid imagery. Those who have experienced it recognized that there is a real

danger when one disconnects and is no longer able to ask for help. Yet they endure and persist and in most cases work their way out of the dark pit (cf. the case of Lael later in the chapter). They realize that their depression is precipitated by isolation and lack of contact with those who can understand them. Their need for communion on a deep level is acute (Jackson, 1998). Depression may be precipitated also by the awareness of having much ability and energy but being too young, too “unplaced” to apply them meaningfully and effectively outside academics: able and willing but nowhere to go (Elkind, 1984).

They have fears. Holding to a high standard for themselves they fear making a fool of themselves. Those who are introverted and emotionally sensitive tend to lack self-confidence and suffer agonies when having to speak in front of an audience. They fear not doing well, of not being the best (many are those who feel they have to be the best), they fear failing in their responsibilities, not fulfilling their goals. As one boy said, the list of possible failures is pretty frightening.

They also think of death, a subject that has received too little attention in gifted literature and in school. As one boy said, “can’t ask questions related to life, only the textbook” (Schultz & Delisle, 2006a, p. 53). Grant (2002, p. 13) observed “the important topics in educating gifted children are self, meaning, sex, relationship, community, life, purpose, ethics, spirituality—the Most Important Things in Life,” subjects that are for the most part avoided. Thinking of death makes some gifted children delve into the meaning of their role in life. Encountering violent death of others—by accident and murder—forces such questions with even greater urgency. Not all are afraid of death. Some expressed curiosity about the process of dying and wished to be able, when the time comes, to be conscious of their own dying and making the transition into the great unknown. Others, however, feared the finality of death and especially of their parents and loved ones more than their own. As for explanation of what happens after death they are divided between those who accept standard explanations offered by religion and those who do not.

It is not unusual for gifted children and adolescents to have precognitions, in dreams or wakefulness, of events that are yet to happen. These experiences are just too common to be discounted. They are intuitive—

knowing something without having the information on which to base it. Precognitions of accidents and death that turn out true are too unsettling to be mentioned in the open. Often a young person has no one to consult with. It is therefore a burden for a child or a young person to have to keep it quiet and have no reassurance about the normality of it (Piechowski, 2006).

As was mentioned earlier, gifted adolescents prefer to cope with their problems on their own. In a study of bullying, Peterson and Ray (2006) found that rather than report it and ask for help, gifted students chose to handle it themselves. Sometimes it meant to just grit their teeth, endure, and not complain. This may explain why despite their overexcitabilities, the suicide rate of gifted young people is not higher than their non-gifted counterparts (Cross, 1996; Cross, Cassady & Miller, 2006).

Psychological Types and Types of Emotional Growth

C. G. Jung’s concept of psychological type identifies four continuous personality dimensions from extroversion to introversion (E-I), from sensation to intuition (S-N), and from thinking to feeling (T-F). One would expect these dimensions to correspond to the overexcitabilities, for instance, thinking to intellectual or feeling to emotional. However, there is very little correlation between overexcitabilities and these dimensions (low correlation for sensual and imaginal with F, and no correlation for psychomotor, intellectual, and emotional). The reason for it is this: the Jungian dimensions are different constructs from overexcitabilities. The Jungian dimensions refer to preferred and *habitual* modes of dealing with the data of experience; the overexcitabilities refer to the *heightened* capacities for both apprehending and generating the data of experience (Lysy & Piechowski, 1983). A further distinction into judging (J) and perceiving (P) was introduced by Meyers and Meyers (1995). There is a significant correlation (.37) between imaginal overexcitability and type P (Lysy & Piechowski, 1983). Among gifted children type P is more frequent than type J, the intuitive more frequent than the sensation type, and the thinking type more frequent than the feeling type; but the gifted consistently are evenly divided between extroverts and introverts (Hawkins, 1998; Cross, Cassady

& Miller, 2006). The higher the level of giftedness, the frequency of both the N and the P type rises dramatically (Meckstroth, 2006). The highly gifted Rhodes scholars are more than ten to one intuitive, and type P is close to twice as frequent as type J. In the general population of high school students it is just the opposite: the intuitive type is about five times less frequent than the sensation type (Meyers and Meyers, 1995). This is one significant source for the gifted feeling “different,” consequently not fitting in school. The situation is one of opposites rather than a match with other students and with teachers (Cross et al., 2006). The prevalence of the intuitive type is consistent with higher frequency of multilevel developmental potential among the gifted.

Meyers and Meyers (1995) describe the “judging” type as oriented toward action by personal executive power of will and choice, while the “perceiving” type as oriented toward embracing experience: “The judging types believe that life should be willed and decided, while the perceptive types regard life as something to be experienced and understood” (p. 69). From analysis of responses rated as emotional overexcitability two types of emotional growth have been identified in gifted adolescents: rational altruistic and introspective (Piechowski, 1989). They correspond exactly to the judging/perceiving distinction. Thus one validates the other as the two typologies were derived independently.

The rational-altruistic type so far has not been analyzed into internal components. The introspective type has eight intrapersonal components. Although on the surface people of the J type fit society’s yardstick for defining a “good citizen” they are nevertheless capable of deep inner life (Lysy & Piechowski, 1983; Piechowski, 2006). Schools clearly prefer J type students because they tend toward achievement and tend not to buck the system unless their logical thinking and strong sense of fairness see a violation of basic principles and rights.

Another type of gifted persons was described by Elaine Aron as the Highly Sensitive Person (Aron, 1997). Aron’s description of the HSP includes a tendency toward introversion, heightened emotional sensitivity, and a combination of intellectual and imaginal overexcitabilities (Piechowski, 2006). In a word, a complex but distinct profile of a person with a sensitive nervous system that is easily overwhelmed by overstimulation. Hence social discomfort and feeling of being a misfit.

Research on Overexcitability

While early studies relied on an open-ended instrument, the Overexcitability Questionnaire (OEQ), new and larger scale studies have been made possible with the advent of a 50-item inventory, the OEQII (Bouchet & Falk, 2001).

Research findings on overexcitability have been reviewed by Mendaglio and Tillier (2006) with the general conclusion that gifted children tend to have higher overexcitability scores than regular children. The difference is particularly strong for creative children and adults. Among consistent findings is the higher emotional score for females than for males and higher psychomotor score for males than for females. The overexcitability profile for artists has received cross-cultural validation in a comparison study of American and Venezuelan artists (Falk, Manzanero, & Miller, 1997). An extensive cross-cultural study of gifted students in Mexico, Spain, Turkey, Taiwan, and the US found a similar overexcitability profile in these six different cultures (Falk, Balderas, Chang, Guzel, & Pardo, 2003).

A study of OE profiles in gifted families found how parents describe their children’s OE profiles, the challenges each OE presents, and the strategies these parents use to cope with them (Daniels, 2006). For instance, in one family, in regard to psychomotor overexcitability, the parents saw its positive side in that the children stay physically fit and do not tire even in physically demanding activities, but it is a challenge for them to endure long car rides or family dinners. Also they do not regulate well their own energy and think they can go on when in fact they are tired and need the rest. They need periods of time to be in motion. So one of the strategies is to let them spend lots of time outdoors skating, biking, or playing ball.

Emotional Giftedness

That some children are emotionally gifted was first suggested by Annemarie Roeper (1982). Emotionally gifted children have deep empathy and respond to the needs and hurts of others. Such children cannot rest until they have set things right for others. This is especially noteworthy when the other is a stranger or someone disliked, e.g., when a child makes a special effort

to be friendly to the class bully as did one 10-year-old girl. Intimidating others, she explained, was his way of covering his own insecurity.

To be emotionally gifted is to dare to act on one's awareness. If there are hungry people one feeds them and makes sure they will not go hungry from now on. If one sees someone in distress, one offers relief. Unfairness and injustice call for defending people's rights.

There are many preteens and early teens who take up social action on behalf of others, actions that become large-scale operations extending over many states, or even many nations. For example, raising thousands of dollars for deaf and blind children, victims of abuse, sending over 100,000 books to African children, providing suitcases for children going into foster homes, providing kid packs for children victims of domestic violence whose parents are in jail are only a few of the ingenious, effective organizational efforts that are motivated by compassion in these very young people (Lewis, 1992; Piechowski, 2003; Silverman, 1994; Waldman, 2001).

Emotional giftedness represents the high end of emotional intelligence. Mayer, Perkins, Caruso, and Salovey (2001) devised ways of measuring components of emotional intelligence. In one of their tests they asked teenagers how they handled emotionally difficult situations: "Think about last time you were out with some friends and they wanted to do something you were uncomfortable with." Mayer et al. hypothesized that emotionally gifted adolescents will resist going along with unsavory intentions of their friends. The results confirmed the hypothesis. Consequently the concept of emotional giftedness was validated (see also Bar-On, this volume). Opportunities for research on the biological basis of emotional giftedness come from the study of mirror neurons. These neurons, which make possible empathy and understanding the moods and intentions of others, are more strongly activated in people who score higher on an empathy scale (Gazzola, Aziz-Zadeh, & Keysers, 2006). At the same time the mirror neurons appear to be defective in autistic individuals (Turk, 2007).

Mayer et al. also realized that in response to their test situation taking a stand in opposition to peer pressure was what Dabrowski named *positive maladjustment*. It means not compromising one's ideals and having the fortitude to stand alone (Dabrowski, 1970). When empathy and sense of justice inspire action to

help and protect others then emotional giftedness and positive maladjustment overlap (Piechowski, 2006). Resisting peer pressure for drugs, sex, and subversive acts are examples of positive maladjustment in which emotional giftedness plays a lesser role.

Emotional giftedness at a higher level of development is represented by Eleanor Roosevelt, Etty Hillesum, Peace Pilgrim, Paul Robeson, Bishop Tutu, all profoundly spiritual persons, and can be also found among case studies of self-actualizing people and gifted teachers (Brennan & Piechowski, 1991; Mróz, 2002; Payne, 1987; Piechowski, 1992; Frank, 2006).

The first piece of research exploring the application of Dabrowski's theory to the personality of a teacher of the gifted is Frank's (2006) study of an inspirational teacher. The criteria of multilevelness applied by Frank revealed an authentic individual, thoughtfully and deliberately engaged in a teaching grounded in the moral foundation of his advanced level of development. The effectiveness of this teacher lay in his Socratic method as an empathic and moral education that can be called teaching for life in the truest sense.

Spiritual Giftedness

From emotional giftedness it takes only one further step to spiritual giftedness (Piechowski, 2001, 2003, 2006). There has been some debate whether or not a case can be made for spiritual intelligence (Emmons, 2000; Gardner, 2000). The argument advanced by Emmons is that what motivates people often has its source in genuinely spiritual concerns. But if one could recognize spiritual giftedness then the case for spiritual intelligence would have been made.

What defines spiritual giftedness is a predisposition toward deep states of consciousness and the facility for entering such states, in short an ease for transpersonal experience (Piechowski, 2006). Among people who take up meditation and various kinds of spiritual discipline many struggle to reach some modicum of calm and inner peace, while some reach it rather quickly and easily. No doubt the capacity for becoming absorbed in an experience when combined with the ability to focus one's mind, relax, let go of pressing concerns and distracting thoughts, predisposes a person for meditation and thereby for developing a deeply spiritual life. One telling example came from

a nun who said that her spiritual inclination dated from childhood. Contact with God was for her deeply emotional: “Sometimes I felt his presence and I remember that I did not need to be saying verbal prayers, they even tired me. . . . I was immediately in his presence. . . . So it was a gift, given freely, of ease of making contact” (Mróz, 2002; Piechowski, 2006, pp. 247–48). It is now known that facility for this kind of experience involves the ability to suppress the activity of an area in the left parietal lobe. That area is involved in self/other dichotomy and depends on input from the senses (Newberg & Newberg, 2006). In deep meditative states the input from the senses is diminished or even completely blocked so no sounds or other sensations reach the meditator.

William James’s (1902) study of the varieties of religious experience was par excellence a study of spiritually gifted people. However, the exploration of the spiritual life of gifted children has barely begun (Lovecky, 1998; Piechowski, 2006). When conducting guided imagery exercises with gifted undergraduates and high school students it was found that scenarios designed for personal growth can, on occasion, evoke a genuine spiritual experience. For example, in an exercise called the Rose, one is guided to watch a rosebud slowly open, then the flower, and finally to look inside: “The rose was of magnificent beauty; it was red with violet tips. The rose then began to open up more and I was able to smell a potent and refreshing scent. Then as the rose opened even more I was able to see and feel a mystical vibrant ball with an aura of its own. When I saw this ball I felt a feeling in my lower chest of glee and inner peace” (Piechowski, 2006, p. 253).

Research on the spiritual life of children was initiated in England by Robinson (1977), and in the United States by Hoffman (1992) and Hart (2003). Children’s spirituality is now a research field in its own right. An *International Journal of Children’s Spirituality* was launched in 1995 and a comprehensive *Handbook of Spiritual Development in Children and Adolescents* came out in 2006 (Roehlkepartain, King, Wagener, & Benson, 2006).

Fostering Emotional Growth

Examining emotional life leads to the question as to how can we give it proper attention and help culti-

vate it. One way is to lead psychosynthesis exercises, or any other guided imagery designed with similar focus. Psychosynthesis techniques are designed for personal and spiritual growth (Ferrucci, 1982). One of us (M.M.P.) led these exercises for a number of years, first with undergraduate students, later with gifted children aged 10–17 years. Gifted children, with very few exceptions, have great capacity for detailed visualization and absorption in the imaginal experience. How this is done is described in detail elsewhere (Piechowski, 2006, Chapter 20). These techniques have also been adapted for elementary age children (Fugitt, 2001; Murdock, 1988). Another way of attending to emotional life is through group process devoted to emotionally charged issues. In a safe space, where no judgment or criticism is allowed to interfere with the process, teens discuss feelings, family, relationships, and the future (Peterson, 1995).

Multilevel Development

Since the emphasis of the theory is on multilevel development, it offers the means of identifying persons at advanced levels of development. The theory contributes constructs of transpersonal development that go beyond Kohlberg’s and Loewinger’s developmental schemes (Piechowski, 2003). Support for the theory was found not only in cross-cultural validation of overexcitability profiles but also through three empirical tests (Piechowski, 1975), a positive correlation (0.44) between the Jungian intuitive type (N) and the developmental level and that all five overexcitabilities correlated with developmental level: psychomotor 0.26, sensual 0.31, intellectual 0.57, imaginal 0.38, and emotional 0.59 (Lysy & Piechowski, 1983). Furthermore, on detailed scrutiny the construct of Level IV corresponds exactly to Maslow’s description of self-actualizing people (Piechowski, 1978). When two independent sets of observations and constructs converge, we can be confident that a real phenomenon has been identified.

For the understanding of emotional growth of gifted children, the distinction between a unilevel and a multilevel process of development is the most relevant. In *unilevel process* values are relative rather

than universal, inner conflicts are recycled rather than resolved, relationships with others do not have a steady footing. Trying every new trend, following fads, being guided primarily by others' opinions is an individual without a center. The shifting nature of the person's identity depends on the circumstances and the people present. Such is often the self of an adolescent. When the process intensifies it becomes *unilevel disintegration*.

A change comes when this state of affairs begins to tire with its meaningless emotional treading water and growing malaise. The search for a way out starts with the realization of the possibility of a more meaningful focus in life. A sense of higher and lower in oneself opens new horizons. Sensing the possibility of something higher in oneself engenders the feeling of inferiority, not to others but toward oneself. It is an inferiority before one's unrealized better self. Soon this feeling of inferiority toward oneself is followed by an array of inner currents and rifts with descriptive names like disquietude with oneself, dissatisfaction with oneself, positive maladjustment, and so on. What they all have in common is the vertical axis of self-evaluation, that judges the distance from the higher in oneself, which attracts, and grows a stronger reaction against the lower in oneself, which repels.

When in a young person we recognize an inner dialogue, self-judgment, distress over a moral conflict we have in front of us a multilevel process. The introspective emotional growth mentioned earlier, has eight components, which help recognize the specifics of the multilevel emotional development in adolescents. They are (1) awareness of growing and changing, (2) awareness of feelings, interest in others and empathy toward them, (3) occasional feelings of unreality, (4) inner dialogue, (5) self-examination, (6) self-judgment, (7) searching, problem-finding, asking existential questions, and (8) awareness of one's real self (Piechowski, 1989; 2006). Looking back at Table 20.1, it becomes clear that the values in such a process can be both individual and universal, that the feelings toward oneself can be rife with inner conflict or they can be showing an emergent self-direction, and that feelings toward others will be sincerely democratic and displaying awareness of interdependence. In cases of intense inner conflict, suffering, inner seeking, and depression, the process becomes *multilevel disintegration* as illustrated in the cases of Lael and Kieran later in the chapter.

Counseling and Psychotherapy for the Gifted

Effective counseling for the gifted requires a therapeutic orientation that strives to help a client integrate all aspects of his being. This inclusive conceptualization gives influential roles to the intelligence and emotional complexity of the client—but not only those aspects. Perhaps more importantly, the wise therapist helps her client evolve and develop, and this requires adopting a multilevel perspective. The development of the personality—taking into account not only the natural endowment of the individual and his social milieu but also a will and motivation to transcend both nature and nurture—is the task of utmost importance for a client of high developmental potential. A personal process of manifesting authenticity and autonomy in his unique human life defines the growth trajectory for many gifted persons. Multilevel development is uncommon: accelerated, idiosyncratic, and often emphatic. It involves effort on the part of the individual; it is neither automatic nor inevitable. This virtual birthing process of the personality, innervating every aspect of one's being, is felt as a compelling drive within the core of an individual with high developmental potential.

A mental health professional should have sufficient awareness and understanding of, and appreciation for, the phenomenological experience of a gifted person. The lived experience of a child imbued with high developmental potential is organic, vibrant, and full of tension and overexcitability. Children who are attuned to and interested in various forms of reality, who are penetratingly aware and sensitive, present many different and rich psychological characteristics. Deep interests, deep probing intelligence, and deep emotional involvement in many and various issues, events, and imaginings, characterize such children. Great effort and deep perception is needed on the part of a professional to appreciate, understand, and respond to their core developmental needs and their unique person.

The inner life of these potentiated children is filled with indeterminate fullness and burgeoning activity. Inherent in all of their experiencing is a strong sense of purpose and intention, or entelechy (Lovecky, 1993, 1998). This deeply ingrained intention is sometimes consciously known and at other times apparent in their action and movement in the world. The developmental template that is

their birthright is both a rich resource and a call to become who they most deeply are. It is a truly heroic quest the gifted child undertakes as he strives toward full-spectrum living. He may experience annoyances and deep frustration, awe, inexorable perceptions and insights, complex original fantasy images, deep connections to others and ideals—and, for him, these are normal occurrences needing acknowledgment and healthy expression. There is an enlivening, animating quality to these experiences for the child, as he has the awareness that they carry the possibility of being transformative and creative. An often absolute and compelling character infuses this core generative quality—the gifted child can appear undeterred and, to the outside world, seemingly incomprehensible. Overall, this lived experience is—for many—an undeniable call toward self-realization and transcendence.

Because of this palpable generative quality, a meaningful psychotherapeutic stance requires incorporating a notion of creativity as an essential factor in healthy development and therapy. Dabrowski (1964, 1970, 1972) asserted that the “creative instinct” was a fundamental determinant for advanced development. What did he mean by this? The idea of a creative “instinct” at work in human development might not be a concept strictly supportable by modern scientific research that focuses on behaviors and environments, but the notion of an inner drivenness toward new realization and improvement, a capacity for conceiving and creating novelty—whether inborn or teachable—seems to be an undeniable quality of many gifted individuals. Furthermore, the tacit infrastructure of existing knowledge—perhaps in any field—will be insufficient for conceptualizing the truly gifted mind and psyche. What does this mean for the counselor approaching work with such a client?

Frequently, it means bringing creativity into the therapeutic relationship in challenging ways for a therapist. This includes accepting the often profound idiosyncratic nature of a client’s symbolism, language, behavior, and/or thought processes—to name a few—and refraining from therapeutic judgment in response. Such unique modes of expression and the potential for multidimensional experiencing in gifted persons spring from their inborn extraordinary intellects, the presence of super-ordinate talents, and the existence of will or “autonomous factors” (Dabrowski, 1964).

Counselors must honor and be aware that this rich capacity is served by an animated and imbued *way of knowing*. Children with high developmental potential apprehend and experience their world through an enlivened sensual knowing; through image, symbol, and metaphor; and through emotionally nuanced and subtle compelling perceptions. Furthermore, this discernment is both a cognitive-intellectual and an intuitive awareness. Strong kinesthetic dimensions flavor the process as well. Such children can be physically stimulated by these uncommon capacities. Muscles, tendons, and joints may be affected by this perceptiveness, and bodily movements and tensions may actually stimulate the knowing itself.

The characteristic of an effective therapist to suspend a tendency to diagnose mental illness or pathologize symptoms is crucial. This does not mean, however, that a therapist can ignore traditional knowledge of mental health issues, nor that she does not need a thorough grounding in a reputable counseling or psychology program. However, a mental health professional needs to keep a consistent consciousness on the possibility that supposed symptoms of mental illness might be mechanisms of growth for the gifted individual.

Insufficiency of Existing Psychotherapeutic Paradigms

Most psychotherapeutic paradigms currently in vogue in the United States are not, in and of themselves, effective for helping a gifted client—especially the highly gifted in stages of advanced development. Commonly used orientations are rarely complex enough, and often pit the client’s mental aspects against each other, exacerbating inner polarization rather than relieving it. For instance, therapies of choice in many US training programs and established agency venues emphasize cognitive, cognitive-behavioral, solution-focused, brief therapy, and group therapy techniques. Emphasis is on short-term relationships with the client, discrete problem-solving techniques, simple symptom-reduction behaviors, and/or optimization of interpersonal functioning. While these are valid and acceptable goals, such single points-of-focus therapeutic work is unsatisfactory for a gifted client. While perhaps helpful for the average therapist or typical patient, such gross simplification—more often

than not—fails the gifted client. Dabrowski repeatedly asserted that the full spectrum of human behavior, especially for advanced development, could not be explained by cognitive or behavioral approaches (1964, 1970, 1972).

Emotional and Social Implications of Dabrowski's Theory

As already discussed, a gifted individual can be particularly sensitive to external stimuli, and he can have extraordinary processing capacities for cognition, emotional intensity and depth, and profound imaginal qualities. These potentials for unique internal experience, while capable of creating exquisite feelings and peak experiences, can cause difficulty for the person as well. Many gifted are acutely aware of the dangers and pitfalls of trying to communicate these intensities (more often than not unshared) with others. Incongruity of the private inner experience versus the external expression of it, which usually must be severely modulated if not curtailed, is often painful for the gifted client. This lack of flow between the inner and the outer worlds can be exacerbated by feelings of loneliness and doubts about one's own sanity, in the absence of a satisfactory mirroring with another. Mirroring the client, unconditional positive regard, accurate understanding, and empathy take on new meaning with a client of great emotional, imaginal, and intellectual complexity, intensity, and depth.

Emotional Sensitivity and Moral Valuation

Dabrowski was convinced that an adequate theory of human mental development was not possible without an incorporation of ethical valuation and an acknowledgement of the complexity of the affective side of mental life. "All that is truly human expresses a hierarchy of values," he wrote in his unpublished manuscript *Authentic Education* (Dabrowski, n.d.). He was greatly influenced by John Dewey, who emphasized the role of intelligence and the capacity for careful discrimination in making moral decisions (Moyle, 2005).

Most psychotherapies involve helping a client to adapt to existing norms because it is assumed that his quality of life (or the quality of life of others in the environment) is adversely affected by an inability or refusal to comply with social expectations. Orienting therapy with a consideration toward multilevel development is implied for the discerning therapist who works with gifted individuals capable of developing beyond commonly accepted cultural parameters or who disagrees with the prevailing moral valuation of his social milieu.

Counseling Using an Integral Approach

Supporting the developmental potential of a gifted child—while not removing the struggle for existence and expression—involves having a profound awareness of subtle cues, conveyed on a multitude of levels. Dabrowski asserted that emotional sensitivity was a key indicator of developmental potential, and he agreed with Dewey that emotions form the basis of ethical and moral valuation, so this characteristic is important to acknowledge in therapeutic planning. Because his intellect is constantly tempered with his emotional complexity, an emotionally charged individual, even with great intelligence, appears less likely to consider himself gifted. The opportunity to experience activation of self-growth through relationship is often problematic for the gifted (Jackson, 1998; Gross, 1993, 1998; Lovecky, 1993, 1998). Many have virtually no human context in which to develop naturally or environments in which to interface, since finding true peers is rare. Being a catalyst of development is a role of great responsibility that a therapist for the gifted must embrace consciously and with wisdom and integrity.

Authentic development, for Dabrowski, meant going beyond genetic endowment and environmental constraints, and required an individual "making commitment to his own particular developmental inner truth" and harmonizing this personal vision with the needs and values, or "developmental inner truths" of others (Dabrowski, n.d.). To this end, the child must be reared and educated in an environment of mutual compassion, understanding, and positive adjustment—not simply adjustment to the changing material conditions of life.

Implicit in the work of mental health professionals should be an emphatic concern for developing ‘giftedness’—not for the purpose of celebrating talent or potential eminence—but instead for helping the manifestation of the child’s talents in the service of his integrated development.

Dabrowski’s Theory Is Non-ontogenetic and Value Based

Dabrowski was clear that development is non-ontogenetic. His is not an age-based stage theory, and thus can be applied to individuals without regard to previous stages or chronological age. Because gifted children often exhibit behaviors and understanding more typical to their elders than their peers, his theory helps to guide gifted education and counseling where other paradigms fall short.

An essential piece of the complex makeup of high DP individuals is their complex moral system. The existence of such systems has been verified consistently in the first and second authors’ clinical practices, and has been mentioned by others, including Gross (1993, 1998) and Lovecky (1993, 1998). The value systems clearly exhibit a hierarchy and include uncommon valuing, subtle and careful discernment, and a dynamic equilibrium—which filters through and infuses all aspects of perception, motivation, and judging. However, when confronted with unsupportive environments, those children who express emotional, intellectual, and imaginal overexcitabilities (OE) can present with overly heightened and misunderstood reactions, sometimes even psychoneuroses. An understanding of the child’s uniqueness and developmental potential from a positive point of view is key for healthy socialization. Persons of high DP should be encouraged in the therapeutic relationship to develop, realize, and take responsibility for their uniquely crafted hierarchy of values. In this sense, concepts of adjustment are directed by the individual’s own potentials, values, and aims.

Dabrowski’s theory helps to see the gifted experience in the new light of a potential for multilevel development. That emotional life leads development and the intellect plays a subordinate role in advanced development, Dabrowski stated in a form of a hypothesis to be tested empirically:

The operation of the dynamisms of multilevel disintegration transforms the intellectual function by liberating it from its subservient role to primitive drives, by increasing its objectivism, widening its horizons, increasing the power of imagination, replacing fallacious and rigid patterns by creative forms. . . and working towards an equilibrium of analytic and synthetic processes of thought and an intimate conjunction of thinking with higher emotions and personality. (Dabrowski, 1970, p. 136)

As indicated earlier, his position finds support in the fact that when the frontal lobe connection between emotion and reason is severed, reasoning remains intact but loses the capacity to choose between alternatives (since it no longer knows their different values, which are decided by feeling) and thus is hopelessly ineffectual (Damasio, 1994).

Supporting the Developmental Inner Truth of the Child with High Developmental Potential

Two case studies, a gifted child and an adolescent with elevated developmental potential, will illustrate this approach. Emphasis is placed on the need for a differentiated understanding of the ways these children know, think, feel, imagine, express, and experience—given their complex and idiosyncratic makeup. Understanding of the child’s uniqueness and developmental potential from a positive point of view is essential for healthy socialization. Education of these children *must* include creative adaptation of standard methods of teaching and behavior. Counseling interventions *must* be informed by an understanding and appreciation of their penetrating capacity for apprehension, their dynamic moment-to-moment experiencing, and their complex moral frameworks.

Children must be encouraged to develop and realize their uniquely crafted hierarchy of values. Adjustment is directed by the child’s own potentials, values, and aims.

As mentioned previously, Dabrowski’s view on education of those with high developmental potential includes an injunction for educators to orient their activities toward the “developmental inner truth” of the child. The multidimensionality of this developmental inner truth is described in Dabrowski’s *Authentic Education*:

All that is truly human expresses a hierarchy of values—a clear indication that the teacher recognizes, in himself, and others, better and worse ways of educating, and that he consciously chooses the “better” . . . It is aimed at educating children in an environment of mutual compassion, understanding, and positive adjustment—adjustment not just to the changing material conditions of life, *but commitment to individual positive developmental changes*. “Authentic” for the child, then, is his commitment to his own particular “developmental inner truth” . . . harmonized with the needs and values, the “developmental inner truths” of others. (Dabrowski, n.d.)

Each person is multidimensional, his psychic being functions in n-space or n-dimensions, and most importantly

each individual has his own “unique n-dimensional inner space.” It is this inner space that belongs to you and you alone and the *growth and development of this inner space* is what personal freedom is all about and what education should be all about. (Yeudall, n.d.)

Social and Emotional Development from a Multilevel Multiple Perspective

How do we help our gifted children grow and develop—through the inevitable dissolutions and self-transcendence inherent in growth—in ways that do not involve unnecessary suffering, benign neglect, or an unhealthy hyper vigilance? We need to help our gifted children:

1. To begin to develop an ongoing awareness of Self: emotions, cognitions, imaginative play, kinesthetic dimensions, sense of right and wrong, instincts and intuitions, and apprehension through intuition and through an elevated sensorium.
2. To develop an awareness of the vastness of the emotional landscape: identify multiple modes and kinds of feelings in self and others and expand their capacity to understand and express emotional knowing.
3. To be able to relate to others and establish human connections across many levels and lines of expression.
4. To develop capacities to acknowledge, express and reciprocate with others in variant circumstances and levels of energy interchange.

5. To learn to identify with and be sustained by in a core Self that directs and is responsive even in times of rapid change and growth.
6. To become aware of and trust developmental dynamics: modalities and manner of development are idiosyncratic.
7. To trust, activate, and support creative impulses, drive, and insights.

The gifted child with high developmental potential is a profound meaning-maker: in the immediate physical reality, in the realm of ideas, in relationships, and in existence/being. The gifted child identifies patterns and inheres order in the phenomena he encounters. He has innate drive for coherence in the disparate elements of his experience and relation. For some gifted children this understanding and coherence is experienced most strongly through emotional channels—for some, the conduits may be intellectual, aesthetic, or kinesthetic. The degree and interactive effect of these channels varies from child to child. Table 20.3 outlines the broad categories of focus for developmental and therapeutic work with these individuals. Included are themes of developing awareness, and developing capacities for personal agency and communion.

The most important point is that there exists a crucial need to help gifted children understand that these fundamental drives—while uncommon—are normative *for them*. A guiding adult must help to provide the right amount of complex stimulus and restorative periods for these children. Acceptance of the child’s innate capacities for self-awareness and self-regulation is key!

Mental Health from a Multidimensional View of Personality Development: The Case of Lael, an Exceptionally Gifted 17-Year-Old

The following case study is written by the first author, a clinical counselor specializing in advanced development of gifted individuals. The “initial impression” portion of this case study is written in first-person narrative to give the reader an in situ perspective of the subtle interplay between counselor and client.

Table 20.3 Components of focus for gifted social and emotional development: a multilevel perspective

	FOCUS	COMPONENTS OF FOCUS	PURPOSE OF WORK
VALIDATE AND DEVELOP CAPACITIES FOR AWARENESS	Awareness of Self	Own self's emotions, cognitions, imaginative imagery, values-sense of right and wrong, spontaneous 'instincts', apprehensions-from intuition, unconscious, and elevated sensorium	To begin to understand and know that to be conscious of one's own natural inclinations, instincts, and inborn proclivities is necessary in order to develop
	Awareness of Others	Others' emotions, cognitions, imaginative imagery, values-sense of right and wrong, spontaneous 'instincts', apprehensions-from intuition, unconscious, and possibly elevated sensorium. Also, awareness of collective and cultural expectations, tacit infrastructure, etc.	To begin to understand and know that others have comparable senses of self-both similar and different, but nevertheless valid; to also begin to understand that the collective environment influences and shapes awareness and development
	Awareness of Emotions	Multiple modes and varieties of feeling in both self and others	To expand capacity to identify and understand one's own and other's emotional states; to develop capacity to accurately and appropriately express emotions
	Awareness of Connections	Interconnectedness and interdependence of self and others	To begin to understand perspectives, subject-object in self and others, spheres of influence and boundaries of ego
VALIDATE AND DEVELOP CAPACITIES FOR AGENCY	Inner Experience	Qualities of motivation, resiliency, inspiration, self as an enduring pattern	To begin to identify with and be sustained by one core self; to begin to modulate inner reality; to trust developmental instincts
	Outer Expression	Sense of purpose, accurate and effective communication of ideas and knowledge, talent expression, creativity	To begin to develop capacities to be proactive, to fulfill creative calling; to activate and support creative impulses, drives, and insights; to effectively realize and produce creative ideas, to manifest unique and unrepeatability personality; to make a difference in the world
	Integration of Both	Coherency, flow, congruency between inner & outer realities, self-regulation, equilibrium	To maintain sense of wholeness and effective expression in the face of environmental pressure
DEVELOP CAPACITIES FOR COMMUNION	Marking Connections Between Self and World	Effective and accurate communication; capacity for participation, friendship, bonding, intimacy; constructing and maintaining relationship; exchange with environment, including: sentient beings and non-sentient objects, spiritual ideations; trusting developmental instincts	To be able to relate to others and establish human connections across many levels and lines of expressions; to effectively adapt to or accommodate others; to acknowledge and reciprocate with others; to develop capacities to react or synergistically co-create

Initial Impression and First Meeting. First Person Narrative

She is remarkably beautiful with a presence and energy that pulsates in the room. Her countenance is mesmerizing in its stillness; there is a penetration of mind and spirit radiating from the stillness of her gaze and subtle movements. I find myself exceptionally attentive to the palpable subtleness of her being. I attempt to remove all expectations from my conscious mind and breathe deeply. Internally, I am disturbed by the apparent fragility she attempts to guard from me. I know, intuitively, that my deepest contemplative bearing is necessary to begin understanding and supporting this deeply troubled young woman.

Her hair is platinum in color; shaved to pink scalp on one side balanced by a long-arc'd fringe. She shyly submits that she designed and sewed her outfit, which is a fusion of lines and cultural influences. Her gaze is concentrated and her conversational style punctuated by long silences with passionate outbursts and subtle riffs into related topics. Teachers report her to be “globally gifted”: excelling in the sciences, the humanities (particularly philosophy), and in visual art. Her artwork is groundbreaking, evocative, technically excellent, and sometimes shocking. She is the top student of the 11th grade class in a magnet school for exceptionally bright learners.

The art specialist at the school is extremely concerned; Lael has been creatively unproductive for 3 months and is increasingly non-responsive. She is described as deeply introverted, reflective, and individualistic. She enjoys creative design, the fields of spirituality and philosophy, and long walks alone; she has several close friends, although she is detached from the general population. She loves music of all kinds. Lael has an exceptionally strong relationship with her father, who is seriously ill and unemployed. In conversation she reports intense internal strife, inexpressible longings, and dissatisfaction. She hints at immoderate emotional distress and alarming irrepressible moods. She is gentle, probing, and reflective. She asks if I will return.

Background

In her grade 11 year Lael is referred for specialized assessment and counseling by her school-based team.

Mental health support for Lael at the time included a psychiatrist, suicide prevention team, counselors at the school, and the gifted specialist. They reported extreme concern about her well-being; she was nonresponsive to their detailed care plan and daily ministrations. She had been diagnosed with major depression; antidepressant medications had been prescribed.

Throughout her life Lael's capacity and passion for visual art provided her with a discerning and redolent creative outlet. She supplemented her multimodal art expression with creative writing in all genres: poetry, journaling, myth making, and story. Lael had multiple ways of expressing herself and strong innate autonomous forces compelling this expression. Her home environment—while fraught with difficulty of underemployment and poverty—encouraged autonomous expression, introspection, and authenticity. Lael was exposed to classical music, philosophical texts, spiritual practice, and rich discussions. Despite daily practical challenges and frequent moves, Lael's parents made every attempt to provide optimal experiences for her within the context of balance in the family and awareness of the needs of their other two children. Lael's parents acknowledged and understood—at least in part—her complex developmental needs and unique ways. Although far from perfect, there was unconditional love, respect, and affirmation within the family dynamic.

This dynamic thoroughly changed when Lael's father became critically ill, in November of her grade 11 year. Lael's brilliant and vibrant father clung to life by a small margin, no longer able to work and completely unable to communicate. Lael's mother became wholly immobilized by the circumstances. Lael felt powerless to help her father or support her mother, intimidated by the medical system and entirely lacking in resources to sustain herself and her family. Her drawings (see Fig. 20.1) from that time included an unforgettable image of non-sustainability and persecution.

These extreme external challenges were the catalysts for a complete breakdown in functioning for Lael. She withdrew from the world around her and found herself increasingly impotent in terms of thinking and creative capabilities. Her sleeping patterns were particularly disturbed and her desire for food diminished. A most frightening symptom for Lael was a radical narrowing of perception and incapacity for abstract



Fig. 20.1

thought. Her expressive faculties became knotted in a progressively more sinister emotional subtext. While at first diminished in discernment and capacity, Lael was soon freighted with destructive impulses, negative thought patterns and a desire for self-harm. Suicidal thoughts emerged; the desire to cut into her own flesh became an ominous and compelling impulse (see Fig. 20.2). Over time her emotional experiencing became trapped in extreme shame and vulnerability. Lael described this state as: “complete darkness, despair, completely overwhelming... I couldn’t see out, I couldn’t make sense, there was no light.”

In an extended essay written after she emerged from the major depressive state Lael described her experience with despair as being on “the underside of infinity”:

It was characterized by emptiness, the diligent feeling of being so alone, and everything in the outer environment just affirmed this belief. It was a pit, and I tried very hard to fill that pit by pushing as much sadness and pain down into it, only to see it was bottomless. I could feel it was so. When I manipulated myself into a corner I’d engulf myself, I’d swallow down, and in a gasp of raw tears I’d look and see the ground open beneath me. I’d invert myself and be pushed under, reaching for a bottom I never found. It was the underside. It was the wrong side of infinite. It lasted a long time.

Differential Diagnoses According to the Theory of Positive Disintegration

From a standardized mental health perspective Lael suffered from major depression. Symptoms of depression are described clinically as a profound mood of sadness or emptiness, an overriding sense of inadequacy, feelings of despondency, a decrease in activity and reactivity, and an emotional state marked by worthlessness, pessimism, and despair. Thinking capacity is often impaired with evidence of retardation of thought process, a sense of mental fuzziness, and lack of cohesion in thought patterns. The depressed person may become very lethargic or extremely agitated. Other physical signs include a poor appetite and weight loss or, in some cases, increased appetite and weight gain. Other characteristics of major depression include negative self-concept and self-blame and pervasive feelings of worthlessness and guilt. A seriously depressed person may have difficulty in concentrating and may show evidence of slowed thinking and indecisiveness. Those afflicted with major depression may report recurring thoughts and images of death and suicide (Jackson & Peterson, 2003).



Fig. 20.2

Considered from a multilevel perspective of the Theory of Positive Disintegration, Lael's situation—while grave—had many positive developmental signifiers. In Dabrowskian terms Lael experienced a positive disintegration that appeared to be both multilevel and global. Dabrowski describes multilevel transformation as that process wherein new and qualitatively different insights and qualities emerge—such that the person is capable of overcoming hereditary and social determination in a movement toward a self-controlled, creative, empathetic, and authentic being.

Lael's experience was global in that it involved all facets of her functioning. Due to strong internal conflicts and a difficult external environment, *all aspects* of Lael's being were loosened and fragmented. This occurred through a decrease in psychical functioning and an extreme tendency for self-analysis, self-criticism, and feelings of inferiority and guilt (Dabrowski, 1972, p. 47). Extreme psychological tension, withdrawal, isolation, fear of activity, and

low mental tension, alternated with periods of high emotional tension. Clearly, in Lael's case, external circumstance catalyzed this psychoneurotic depressive state. Lael's inner dialogue, occasional feelings of unreality, and piercing self-examination were earmarks of a positive disintegrative experience. Dabrowski believed that when depression is a function of developmental potential it allows for the development of self-evaluation and profound awareness of the value of others. He believed that

behind the facade of depression there may be hidden a developmentally necessary psychological withdraw serving the function of self-criticism, self-analysis, self-control, a justified dissatisfaction with oneself and feelings of inferiority with respect to one's possibilities. If these processes can be found in depression they indicate a potential for positive growth. (Dabrowski, 1972, p. 255)

Lael presents with extraordinarily high developmental potential. Her history reveals that even as a young child she actively engaged all aspects of Self: a complex and probing intelligence, resonant imagination, nuanced emotional awareness, and suffused sensual experiencing. The awareness of higher and lower—the earmark of multilevelness—existed in Lael from earliest times. The realizations of transcendent values, of the interdependence of all creation, and of her own “real self” were inner templates in Lael—seeking emergence and coherence in the world around her. De Quincey (2002) describes this emergent human capacity: “Our living organism is a system tingling with purpose and evolved expectations: a system designed for self-preservation, for reproduction, and ultimately for self-transcendence.” Powerful forces of intuition, intellectual capacity, and imaginal acuity fed Lael's intense self-awareness; these *activated* higher-level sensing perceptions. Lael's inner world—an amalgam of emotional, imaginal and intellectual experiencing—was rarely reflected in the world around her, particularly in educational and social milieus. She reported extreme loneliness, estrangement, and feelings of unreality in her school settings. While she excelled in all school subjects and continued to perform at extraordinarily high levels, she was increasingly emotionally laden and at odds with the social and academic dynamic.

Most painful for Lael were her experiences in gifted programming where she found no outlet for the totality of her understandings and apprehensions. Lael

intuitively sought intellectual experiences that would serve her drive toward higher level experiencing and morality and the development of her personality. Lael was offered, instead, higher-level thinking opportunities, complex knowledge acquisition, and creative outlets independent of the very core of her being: her innervated emotional, intuitional, and instinctive elements. Dabrowski wrote that multidimensional development *must* be fully rounded and

not restricted to the perfection of one or some capacities and skills but instead includes a transformation and refinement of all basic aspects of mental life including innate drive, emotions, intellect, volition, imagination, moral, social aesthetic and spiritual components. (Dabrowski, n.d., italics added)

On the Development of the Personality Through Multilevel Disintegration

According to Dabrowski, the development of personality—the highest level of human development—occurs through the disruption of the existing, originally integrated organization of a person’s being. This disintegration destroys the existent psychic unity of the individual. The cohesion—which has provided meaning and purpose—dislodges, and the individual is propelled toward a different unity, a higher level of reality. This birthing process of the personality involves effort and the innervation of every aspect of one’s being; this is what the deepest forces of self-expression compel.

Lael is emphatic that her disintegrative experience was essential for her overall development. She alludes to her knowledge of a higher state of knowing—what Dabrowski termed the Personality Ideal:

My “less than optimal” emotional state I have come to regard as an essential piece of my development. In its absence I cannot be certain what qualities I would have instead acquired, or what knowledge I would have failed to learn. I consider it to have happened for a specific reason, enmeshed in a much larger plan that I have now begun to understand.

Even during the most disturbing of times Lael’s creative capacity informed her and affirmed the developmental nature of her disturbing disintegrative experience. Her creativity was a critical determinant in her capacity to reintegrate and work through the intense depressive experience. Her night-time dreams,

her artwork in its myriad forms, and her writing and journaling illuminated and brought to her *conscious mind* the awareness that aspects of her being needed consideration and care. In a lengthy composition, linking will to intention and purpose Lael talked about how she has learned to pay attention to *all aspects* of her developing being and how she had learned to deeply trust the developmental process (cf. Table 20.3):

I just made a fabulous connection to a very old dream. It’s quite perfect, because in that dream, hear the words that came to me, “for on his unsafe skin there was a tar with the safety of gasoline, and in him they will wreak of fear for his smell of potential burning.” I think it is amazing that it should make the most wonderful sense at this moment. This is how I (not one, this isn’t a silly English paper, it is I, as *I Am*) know that all things are working in purpose that is reality, and existence, and awareness, which is then all the outcome as well. That I should have a dream of two years ago, which I always kept so close with me, knowing it was important, suddenly turn into something new and different, though I knew it all along.

Her drawing of “great turbines” and the accompanying text illustrates this deeper knowing that flowed from Lael’s immensely creative processes and heightened self-awareness (see Fig. 20.3). The text on this drawing reads: “The most powerful of heavy handed dreams. I turn my body at the center of great turbines; I spin through the grinder. I am *deconstructed to be reconstructed at a later date.*”

Lael’s depressive state was emblematic of a multilevel disintegration in which the nucleus of the personality ideal was activated. This involved criticism of oneself, disquietude and dissatisfaction, feelings of inferiority toward oneself because of unfulfilled possibilities, guilt feelings, and an excessive tendency to self-observation and self-objectivity. Dabrowski attested that this process allowed for a “clearing of the field” for a new creative force in the individual (Dabrowski, 1972). Lael’s description of this clearing is particularly erudite:

The depressive state I experienced acted as a catalyst for personal growth; compression of thought or mood into a lower frequency that still at times occurs, has become part of a pattern I can respect for its ability to elicit specific responses from me. Often such a constriction will be followed shortly by its dissipation and a sense of self and awareness has been heightened. In those moments it may be unpleasant, but my major hurdle for the most part has been crossed. What I experience now is akin to the tightening of a spring before it is released; I must

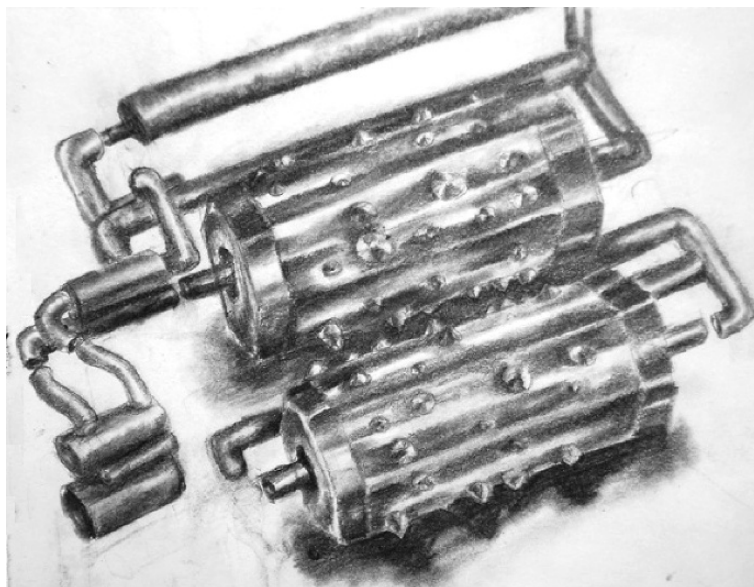


Fig. 20.3

be forced a few steps back in order to develop the tension and potential that will allow me to move even farther ahead. It is through this process that I am working through many levels, clearing away confusion, old tendencies, stale energy...

This immense inner conflict and anguishing depressive state birthed a young woman with articulated self-awareness and self-direction (characteristic of Level IV). Lael's discerning nature allowed her to reflect on the nature of the disintegrative incident, bringing penetrating insight into the all-encompassing nature of such unfathomable experience:

To get to this point I experienced a rather long and arduous journey. It is difficult to remember because I no longer resonate with the components of that former version of myself. I was the underside. That is what I will refer to it as, because it is part of the whole, but it is so focused and consumed with its negativity, its downward direction that it cannot conceive; it cannot *know* anything beyond itself.

At the beginning of the downward spiral into her extreme depressive experience Lael drew "Outsource" (see Fig. 20.4) which captures the wrenching and absolute experience of a multilevel global disintegration. It is clear from this drawing that every part of her is engaged in the deepest of processes.

Lael was able to reflect on the origin and existence of the depressive state attesting that it had roots in her



Fig. 20.4

earliest childhood. The multilevel process of inner dialogue, self-judgment, and self-examination was evident early in her life. Her current capacity to transcend and take hold of her emotional processes independent

of external demands and memories is especially evident in the following quote:

I first experienced this concentrated sensation when I was ten or eleven, but I can trace the lines of those feelings even further back. The extent of it I think was somewhat severe, using my present state as a reference point. I have to admit I'm somewhat dampened now. It's a fortunate thing this was the last question. I can turn it around now however, so I think I will.

At the center of Dabrowski's ideas in the nexus of his theory was his understanding of the positive aspects of disintegrative experience. In this view, the psychoneurotic depressive state experienced by Lael represented a phase of accelerated authentic development. With astonishing insight Lael described her experience as a form of death that occurred as part of a series of smaller deaths that she believes will pave the way for an integrated transcendent consciousness:

I experienced a little death, and I have even littler little deaths that allow for truer life. The smaller the death, the closer I can become to a self-actualized individual, until there is one smooth transition into full consciousness. The little deaths are needed if one wants to become closer to the higher self while they are living. Physical death is a symptom of duality, it ends the sojourn and returns us to full consciousness in one step, but it is these smaller acts of disintegration and reintegration that will allow for the flow of the physical into the psychical. I imagine that is how we will discover immortality.

The Role of the Counselor in Global Multilevel Disintegration in the Case of Lael

At the time of this writing Lael had been in weekly psychotherapeutic support with the first author for 14 months. Lael's initial presentation was exceptionally brittle; her mood state was volatile and she presented with strong suicidal ideation. Compounding this profile were the vestiges of a disordered eating pattern and anxiety symptoms. Lael needed informed, consistent, and highly nuanced psychotherapy.

The first few sessions established a strong clinical rapport between client and counselor and provided insight into Lael's multifaceted and dynamic inner world. Lael's support team at school provided the family background, an academic and social summary, and the psychiatric profile. At the time Lael was working on a massive canvas depicting a very dark

wood and a lost figure. As part of her International Baccalaureate Art Program, Lael had deadlines to meet; she reported acute frustration with that particular art piece. More generally she presented with unfathomable anguish and almost unspeakable helplessness.

Lael was happy to share many aspects of her internal processing with the first author. She brought sketches, poetry, and journal entries to sessions. Her therapist worked in a deeply intuitive fashion—allowing Lael to discuss, present, and explore all aspects of her being. Over time, Lael began to express profound intuitions, and instinctive awareness—previously locked up in a complex emotional, moral, and intellectual matrix. She hinted at unsavory experiences in her past, stating that she wished to express them but feared they might harm the listener. In the end, she chose to work through those memories in a non-verbal fashion through her art. When offered the opportunity to put them in verbal form and share in a counseling session she declined, stating that she had already worked them through and was no longer beleaguered by them. She was encouraged to find her own pace, to stay involved with school activities and with family. She was strongly advised to continue to walk in nature, to eat nourishing foods, and to follow her creative and developmental instincts. She was also encouraged to continue to interact with two or three other exceptionally gifted students in her program (cf. Table 20.3). Over time, she developed a strong relationship with an exceptionally gifted and integrated younger boy. She also connected with a couple of young women—even though their intellectual appetites and capacities could not meet Lael's widening intellectual and emotional range and her compelling *need to know*.

The first author provided Lael access to resources of many kinds: philosophical and psychological texts, higher level art experiences, poetry, and exploration of various spiritual traditions. The impetus for these explorations was driven solely by Lael. She absorbed information and experience at an amazing rate, all the while maintaining her almost perfect academic record in the Internal Baccalaureate program. She worked through ongoing terror and grief about her father and began to assert herself—for the first time—at home and in school settings.

Her art experiences continued to provide a context to integrate all aspects of her developing being. At the urging of the first author she destroyed the dark woods

painting. She chose to use the salvaged strips of canvas from that painting to build a three-dimensional figure of a pregnant woman. Once the strips were incorporated in the life-sized sculpture, she entered a robust creative period where dream images, past memories, and current fantasies were crafted from various mediums and integrated into a stunning art piece. Lael was actively working through the relationship between her innate capacities (first factor), her environmental influences and experiences (second factor), and growing awareness and confidence in the third factor or personality ideal (Dabrowski, 1964, 1970, 1972).

Further explanation of the intricacies and nature of the counseling intervention is well beyond the scope of this chapter and will be explored in a later text. An interesting synchronicity brings closure to this discussion. Midway through the first year Lael was pleased to provide a gift for her therapist. While exploring in a major city Lael entered a second-hand bookstore and found, among several other appealing books, what promised to be an interesting text. She bought it and presented it to the first author: *Positive Disintegration* by Kazimierz Dabrowski, the 1964 book that introduced Dabrowski to the West. Lael's creative and developmental dynamisms were clearly at work in the world.

Case Study Number Two: Kieran

The second case study describes an 8-year-old boy—Kieran—who attended school in a rural area in an undifferentiated school program, regular classroom. Kieran's mother contacted the first author for help in determining the best response for Kieran's complex and often conflict-filled behavior patterns. She felt strongly that school officials needed to understand his giftedness; she, too, needed guidance in understanding his complex emotional responses.

At the time of the intervention, Kieran was placed in a Behaviorally Disordered program. Outbursts, violent encounters, and non-compliance in the classroom occurred daily. Teachers, counselors, and parents were at a loss as to how best meet his needs. They cautioned that he appeared to have no compassion for others and could be especially unpredictable, even dangerous. His psycho-educational report stated that he was quick to read social cues and excelled in higher-level problem

solving and comprehension. It was reported that his IQ was high and that he had a writing disability ("written-output disorder"). He showed extreme difficulty in using a pencil and paper, and no patience with rote tasks. He demonstrated a gift for all aspects of mathematics and was reported to have a love of animals. It was known, as well, that he had experienced a number of challenges in his family and that his father lived in another country, estranged from his family.

Initial Impression and First Meeting: First Person Narrative

He is a stout, dark-eyed, dark-haired young boy. His gaze is direct and unflinching. It is clear that he does no wish to be in the room with me. He looks like an "old hand" at interview protocol. I sense a complex intellect, *extreme* sensitivity, and a highly defended way of operating in the world. I ask him a little about his day, comment on his school, and soon we are engaged in a conversation. Eventually I ask him if he would be willing to do some drawings for me. I assure him that I have no artistic talent and no urge to judge his. After some time he agrees to draw images of his family. He has an unyielding pencil grip and appears to be very conscientious. It takes an extremely long time for him to create even one figure; I find myself in a state of deep relaxation and repose. He looks up and asks me what I am thinking. I tell him "not very much; I am simply relaxing." I comment that he seems to be so focused that I appreciate his attention to the task and that I am in no hurry for him to complete the exercise. I affirm that he controls the pace. He returns to his task and then gently touches my arm: "Would this be easier for you?" he asks. I watch as he turns the paper 180 degrees for my viewing ease and continues to laboriously draw figures from an upside-down vantage point. I am deeply moved by his awareness of my perspective; in the recess of my mind I contrast this action with the label of "non-compassion" and a pattern of social deviance on the report from school officials.

The crude but meticulous drawings reveal many things: his isolation from all-male figures, his closeness to his mother, and his deep ambivalence about family life. I make no comment on the family dynamic, but I sense that I may have established a degree of trust with him. He appears relaxed, interested, and certainly less

defended. When asked to demonstrate some of his ability in Math, I encounter the deep willfulness and intellectual surety at the core of his being. I find this surety mildly amusing and deem the strong will an important therapeutic ally for future development. We agree on a second meeting date and shake hands to bring closure to our meeting.

Background and Developmental Profile

Kieran's history revealed a little boy rife with developmental potential who was exposed to extremely trying life circumstances. It is clear that he possessed all of the overexcitabilities, an autonomous nature, exceptional cognitive ability, and a special talent (Mathematics). In particular, he exhibited extremely heightened sensual awareness, complex, and nuanced awareness of the needs and feelings of others, a love of intellectual "play", and a deep curiosity about how things work.

Kieran's mother stated that he has always had remarkable insight, acute intelligence, and an extremely sensitive nature. She described his experience in formal schooling as disastrous; a review of the file makes it clear there had been no accommodation for his "written-output disorder" and only modest adaptations for his high cognitive ability. Kieran's frustration with academic life was extremely high and his penetrating capacity to discern deeper patterns in all phenomena had gone unnoticed and unrewarded. Kieran's mother also provided information about his social profile. She reported that he had always played well with his cousins—also identified as gifted children—but was often in conflict with other young boys. She acknowledged that she and Kieran had always been close; she and Kieran's father had divorced several years previously. Kieran occasionally saw his father, in summer vacation and for week long holidays. He apparently returned from those vacations extremely agitated and unable to settle back into his life.

Counseling Intervention

Kieran's behavior in a one-on-one interview with most adults was excellent. In a classroom setting, however, Kieran quickly became agitated, distracted,

and intractable. Kieran needed immediate intervention to deal with his learning and social needs. He needed an adapted curriculum to include higher-level mathematics and opportunities for in-depth study in areas of deep interest, an assessment to determine the extent and best response for his writing output challenges, and time with other gifted learners in academic and social settings. The first author additionally recommended that the behavioral team build in breaks throughout the day for one-on-one interaction, away from the classroom setting. A hot beverage and conversation with a caring adult, a walk in the treed and welcoming playground, or time on the swing were built into Kieran's day. Kieran's strong kinesthetic and sensual nature needed appropriate outlets; his impatience with the routine of classroom activities needed tempering. He was given control over when the breaks happened and quickly learned that he needed to use that responsibility wisely and appropriately.

Emotigram cards were made for Kieran. His love of animals and deep emotional awareness was honored and given response. Each card was a specially chosen picture of animals, expressing a wide variety of subtle emotions and natural feelings: great anticipation, fierceness, sleepiness, and deep contentment—to name a few. Kieran chose all the pictures himself, the pictures were laminated and tags were placed on them with the descriptors he wrote. He kept the cards in his desk and periodically reviewed them as a way of staying in touch with the feelings moving throughout his being. Kieran's feelings were immensely nuanced and he often expressed them in inappropriate ways that negatively fed his psychomotor and sensual overexcitabilities. He needed to develop awareness of the multiple modes and kinds of feelings that inhered in his complex personal profile (cf. Table 20.3).

The cards were used to communicate with the adults in his life as well, and Kieran became aware that his feelings were often hard for others less prepared to understand. He began to develop an ongoing awareness of his Self: his apprehension through intuition, imaginative play, strong instinct, and emotional complexity (cf. Table 20.3). In this way, he began to develop a verbal vocabulary and more appropriate ways of responding to his stratified inner world. Thus was enacted the recommendation that gifted children with high developmental potential learn to acknowledge, express, and reciprocate with others in situations holding disparate levels of emotional "charge".

Kieran also needed family counseling aimed at helping him explore his feelings about his father, his stepfather, and his current family situation. Kieran's explosiveness in social situations needed to be dealt with; he expressed great hurt and unmet longings related to his relationship with male adults. Kieran's mother needed to learn that although Kieran could *discuss* complex human interaction with great insight and awareness, he could not always *integrate* those insights, his multifaceted feelings, and the immediate sensual and kinesthetic expressions that inhered. With awareness of the many needs and the depth of Kieran's awareness and negative feelings, Kieran began to slowly integrate aspects of his developing Self.

Conclusions

Dabrowski's theory has pioneered understanding of the emotional life of the gifted; it provided a basis for research on multilevel emotional development. The concept of developmental potential includes the characteristics of intensity and sensitivity (overexcitability) as a fundamental part of the theory. In addition to the intellect these constructs provide validation of the gifted experience encompassing personal energy level, sensual aliveness, imagination, and emotional life. Dabrowski's delineation of the processes of unilevel and multilevel disintegration offers understanding of the profoundly gifted in existential crises.

The case studies of Lael and Kieran illustrate how important it is to consider mental health issues from an alternative diagnostic perspective. Aspects of Dabrowski's theory were used to shed light on the developmental inner truth of these two exceptionally gifted young people. An integral psychotherapy approach was utilized to attend to their serious and complex presentations of distress. The counselor was mindful and responsive to all aspects of these developmentally advanced young people and established a healing partnership based on this multidimensional and dynamic awareness.

Finally, the theory provides a template for counseling and psychotherapy of the gifted in critical periods of emotional and personal growth. The necessary characteristics of a therapist approaching work with the gifted, and connections between the theory and counseling have been outlined. Overexcitabilities

play a huge role in the dynamics of gifted development, consequently must be considered in the therapeutic relationship, and should not be viewed as symptoms of mental illness.

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