
AN EVOLVING FIELD

Contemporary Voices on Dabrowski's Theory of Positive Disintegration

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"To be authentic does not mean to be natural, to be as you are, but as you ought to be."

(Paul Cienin, 1972, p. 22; pen name of K. Dabrowski)

For Dabrowski, the tension between "isness" and "oughtness" provided the framework for his life's work. As his theory of positive disintegration evolved, the usefulness of this work moved beyond the fields of psychology and psychiatry. The field of gifted education has benefited markedly because so many of the concepts have resonated for educators, psychologists, and counselors who work with gifted people as well as researchers who have adopted aspects for study and investigation.

Specifically, Dabrowski's concept of overexcitabilities is one that has received considerable attention. Yet, this is only one facet of the overall theory. "An Evolving Field" is a regular feature of the *Roeper Review* and typically features someone in the field of gifted education, or in a related field, who embodies the mission of this publication. The difficulty for this special issue is that to focus on one individual who is connected to Dabrowski and gifted education would leave out significant others. For that reason, this is a modified group interview in which a panel of Dabrowski experts has been invited to share their responses to the following question: "Much of the literature that connects Dabrowski's theory and gifted education centers on the concept of overexcitabilities. In your opinion, what other key concepts are essential to know and understand to better grasp the complexity of Dabrowski's theory and to inform the field of gifted studies?"

R. Frank Falk provides a succinct overview of the key concepts in his remarks and each succeeding author builds on this framework: For me there are four main concepts in Dabrowski's theory: multilevelness (differentiating higher from lower), developmental potential, developmental level, and positive disintegration as a developmental process. The theory is a non-ontogenetic description of personality development ending with the possibility of an ideal life for

humanity. It helps intense, sensitive, and caring people (characteristics often associated with the gifted) to understand their trials and difficulties. It provides a topographical map of life.

Bill Tillier elucidates these concepts in greater detail with his comments: In my opinion, the application of overexcitability in the gifted field has been based upon a faulty premise that may significantly impact its interpretation and ultimate meaning. Dabrowski's basic approach to mental health and the criteria for health and positive adjustment is quite unique and must be considered in context. Dabrowski's broad approach to understanding personality development includes several fundamental concepts. For example, that development occurs through the process of positive disintegration and psychoneurosis. Development occurs in the context of a multilevel view of reality and involves transitions from a lower, simpler view to a higher, new and more complex perception of reality. The parameters determining the trajectory of development (positively or negatively)—developmental potential—originate in the constitutional endowment of an individual. Positive developmental potential includes a number of subconcepts including the instinct for self perfection and the developmental instinct. Dabrowski suggested three concrete aspects to assess developmental potential; special abilities and talents, autonomous factors (primarily the third factor) and overexcitability.

The premise that overexcitability is an independent construct is faulty. To try to define and apply overexcitability removed from the overall context of development potential and without the benefit of the context of multilevel development occurring via positive disintegration, greatly reduces the explanatory power of the concept and risks generating misunderstandings and misapplications. To understand the overexcitable individual and extrapolate what overexcitability means and implies, and most importantly, to understand how to manage overexcitability, requires an understanding of, appreciation of, and ultimately, the application of, Dabrowski's overall approach. In my opinion, if this can be achieved, Dabrowski's theory of positive disintegration has much to contribute to the gifted field, including the motivational aspects of third factor (an aspect not yet studied in the gifted) and the impact of overexcitability.

Susan Daniels notes that the concept of developmental potential, specifically, the third factor could benefit from further explanation: The role of the third factor, it seems, receives little attention in discussion of the applications of the theory of positive disintegration to work with gifted children. Dabrowski theorized that high developmental potential results from the constellation of inherent talents and abilities, overexcitabilities, and the third factor—which refers to will, self-determination and autonomy. In other words, those who achieve high levels of development do so with conscious desire and determination. A decision is made to

participate in the cultivation of one's own development and to engage in the oftentimes arduous intrapsychic work that transforms one's very self. As teachers, parents, and counselors who care deeply about the development of gifted youth, then, it becomes essential that we listen deeply to their cares, concerns, and desires. To foster the realization of developmental potential, caring adults must facilitate every opportunity for gifted youth to engage in the active exploration and pursuit of pathways for living their best lives.

Nancy Miller focuses on the concepts of multilevelness and developmental levels as areas for further consideration: The concept of greatest interest to me is "multilevelness." By knowledge of levels of development, and particularly levels III, IV, and V, we see the form advanced development takes—the values held, the self-perspective, and the relations with others. Gifted and talented children and adults have the potential for higher-level development because they have the innate emotional, as well as cognitive, ability required. This means they can be the loving parent who considers the needs of the child first, the person who considers the needs of the community above the personal, and the one who cares for those least able to care for themselves. They can become the peacemakers, the compassionate and able leaders the world needs. They can become decision makers with the highest human values—those that benefit humanity most. They can become saints among us.

The concept of overexcitability describes the potential of those who are gifted and talented; multilevelness shows the direction and goal that is possible. Supporting the positive expression of overexcitability in children encourages the growth of which they are capable.

Michael M. Piechowski also observes that developmental potential and levels of development are of deep importance: The first thing to understand is how Dabrowski viewed development. For him development starts with the formation of the inner psychic milieu, which occurs in level III with repeated experiences of higher versus lower in oneself. That experience is lacking in level II. This level is not always in process of disintegration because of the possibility of partial integrations, which can be adaptive. Level I is the antithesis of development, with very limited developmental potential. Consequently, it cannot be the starting point of development through positive disintegration. In view of this, Dabrowski's theory is still a good theory even if we ignored the first two levels.

It is important to keep in mind that levels are abstract concepts; they are not real; only people's lives are real. Levels need to be understood as large concepts with a lot of room for a diversity of paths and patterns of development. With this in mind, level II needs to be approached with respect and empathy because personal growth is possible, a very tender quest for self in persons who fulfilled roles, obeyed the rules, trusted authority but had no sense of their own person, their own self.

So, how does a person get from level II to III? This depends on a developmental potential that has multilevel components, or multilevel “nuclei” as Dabrowski used to say. So, whichever way you look at it, without multilevel potential there is no multilevel development, that is, there is no development in Dabrowski’s sense of the term.

Linda Kreger Silverman comments on the relationship between the levels of development and their function: A concept in Dabrowski’s Theory that holds importance for me is the relationship between functions and levels of development. This perspective could resolve many arguments. For example, “Is perfectionism good or bad?” The answer depends on the person’s level of development. At Level I, perfectionism is oppressive—judging others as inferior. At Level II, it can be debilitating, because it is woven into self-doubt and the introjected values of others. At Level III, when it merges with hierarchization, it becomes “inferiority toward oneself”—a dynamism that propels development toward higher levels. At Level IV, it evolves into “self-perfection,” which leads to a life imbued with higher level ideals. At Level V, it is recognition of the inherent perfection in all that is. So which level of “perfectionism” are we talking about? “The differences between levels of an emotional expression are greater and more significant than differences between particular emotions” (Dabrowski, with Piechowski, 1977, p. 119).

Susan Jackson explains that the concept of multilevelness and the dynamic of disintegration are aspects of the theory for reflection: Dr. Dabrowski’s penetrating insights into advanced human development are unparalleled in the field of psychology, and provide a lifeline for highly gifted persons whose extraordinary developmental potential delivers life experiences and perceptions that can be mind shattering. Two concepts are of particular importance: multilevelness in human experience and the role of disintegration in the dynamic of development. Highly gifted persons tap into and are galvanized by what Dabrowski termed theoretical reality. Reality perceived through the senses (the here and now of commonplace existence) is but one reality. The exceptional minds naturally access higher level forces of fantasy, imagination, and intuition. In this rich milieu they solve problems, gain insights and create on a level of abstraction separated from the world of direct sensory perception. For those endowed with moral sensitivity, immense imaginative powers, a rich affective life, and an unmitigated need for intellectual inquiry, this theoretical reality is more real, more understandable and of greater significance than the reality of everyday life. Dabrowski wrote: “Adjustment to that which ‘ought to be’ is in some individuals stronger than their adjustment to ‘what is.’” For them, development is modulated by interpenetrating disintegrative and integrative experiences, shaping the intellectual function by linking with higher-level emotions. This creates an integrated structure of higher-level consciousness where thinking and feeling associate

in codetermining ways. Further developmental transformation occurs as the higher-level intuition is then animated and elevated, creating an ongoing dynamic synthesis of direct intuited experience. This multilevel functioning and dynamic of development, while uncommon, is a natural evolutionary process for highly gifted individuals. Dr. Dabrowski’s seminal ideas provide rare insight into these exceptional and advanced developmental processes.

Elizabeth Mika also discerns that positive disintegration is a key concept for further thought: Positive disintegration is the key concept of Dabrowski’s theory, and yet it is conspicuously missing from TPD-related discussions in the gifted field. Overexcitability is the best known part of TPD, but it is also commonly misunderstood. Those misunderstandings are a direct consequence of omitting positive disintegration from OE-related work, in my opinion. Talking about OE outside of the context of positive disintegration is akin to discussing single planets without ever mentioning the existence of the universe. And to understand positive disintegration, we need to discuss multilevelness, as well as dynamisms and their role in development. This means that we have to bring back a clinical focus to our discussions, since we cannot talk about positive disintegration without talking about psychopathology. Overexcitability is an asset—in fact, a necessary condition—to personality development as understood by Dabrowski, but this means it is also a precursor to disintegration, positive and sometimes not. It is a characteristic encountered in many, if not all, cases of psychiatric disorders, some of which are less positive, developmentally, than others. We need to be able to better understand the role overexcitability plays in development, both positive and negative—and in order to do so, we have to talk about positive disintegration. Understanding of positive disintegration would also help professionals from fields other than gifted education gain a better insight into unique struggles experienced by those gifted individuals who are endowed with high developmental potential.

Cheryl M. Ackerman comments on the difficulties associated with positive disintegration: The most important thing Dabrowski has to offer those interested in the well being of others, is that the process of development is not an easy one. His most important contribution, therefore, is the concept of positive disintegration, the process of development he describes and his view that the difficulties inherent to the developmental process; confusion, feelings of inadequacy, anxiety, depression, and other so-called mental illnesses, are necessary for development to occur. They should not be dismissed, “cured,” or medicated away. Individuals, gifted and nongifted alike, need to be understood and supported through these difficulties as they move forward on their developmental paths. That Dabrowski describes the inner life and

the behaviors of people at different developmental levels, only contributes to the usefulness of his theory in helping educators and therapists do their work, as well as helping developing individuals understand themselves and the world around them better.

Sal Mendaglio continues the focus on positive disintegration with an emphasis on the role of the emotions: My answer to your question is: the paramount importance of emotions. Other personality theorists, such as Carl Rogers, referred to emotions but not the way Dabrowski did in the theory of positive disintegration. When it comes to emotions, the theory includes two astonishing propositions. First, negative emotions, such as anxiety, are not symptoms of mental illness but rather prerequisites of development. Second, and more important to me, emotions drive the development of personality. On this last point, psychology has finally caught up with Dabrowski—that emotions affect personality development is currently seen by some psychologists as a truism. Amazingly, Dabrowski not only proposed this view but also specified how emotions direct the development of personality; and, he did this over 50 years ago. To be accurate, Dabrowski said that emotions are necessary for the achievement of personality. An appreciation of Dabrowski's perspective on emotion and personality would likely spare some gifted individuals from psychiatric diagnoses, while providing a richer understanding of the construct of giftedness.

Vickie Moyle expresses the totality of the theory and summarizes those aspects that render it distinctive: The beauty and uniqueness of Dabrowski's theory is in a profound recognition and consideration of human development that includes the exceptional. He took a highly personal, phenomenological perspective in ways that other theories don't.

Dabrowski reframed the idea of *exceptionality* as extraordinary development that is integrated across all mental capacities at new levels—rejecting the idea that being clever, powerful, or eminent is the mark of an advanced human

being. He took into account the presence of a discriminating mind as well as imaginative capacity and deep emotional connection to others. He was interested in the qualities that sustained existence and begat true moral action.

He reframed the role of *creativity*, as a driving force in development, without which the human species could neither evolve nor survive. He championed the soul of the poet, the seer, and the artist—and suggested that creative genius isn't going to be recognized or welcomed by a society intent on preserving its vested interests.

Most importantly, Dabrowski reframed *mental health*, promoting the idea that being mentally healthy must be assessed in terms of development, with an individual's strivings and potential in mind. Symptoms of development, he insisted, might look like symptoms of dysfunction if looked at only from the standpoint of assimilation into an environment (but perhaps one whose viewpoint itself might be maladjusted). He lived to prevent the marginalization and squandering of human potential, and rejected the automatic pathologizing of individuals who didn't operate smoothly within their societies. He consistently advised professionals to aid in development and not hinder it by considering symptoms in a more multilevel context.

In summary, it is clear that each of these experts shares a perspective that illuminates some of the features of the overall theory. As noted, the broad aspects outlined by Falk were described in greater detail by the rest of the panel, with Moyle capturing the essence of the theory and summarizing the unique aspects. Deeper exploration of many of these ideas is the focus of this special issue.

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