

THE THEORY OF POSITIVE DISINTEGRATION
AND PERSONALITY THEORY

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The purpose of this paper is to analyze the theory of positive disintegration in terms more familiar to the North American specialist and to compare it with some other personality theories. Such a comparison is not, of course, an attempt to evaluate the theory of positive disintegration. The theory stands nothing to gain or to lose by being comparable to other theories or being translatable into the terms of some other theory. Rather, it must be evaluated by the usual criteria of scientific theories, i.e., logical consistency and empirical support. It is hoped, however, that--apart from being an interesting intellectual exercise-- such an analysis may serve several useful purposes; it may make theory more acceptable and comprehensible to the North American specialist; it may point out the specific characteristics and contributions of the theory; it may bring out aspects needing further clarification.

The attempt to carry out the proposed analysis presents certain difficulties and it may be profitable to discuss them briefly at the outset. It is generally accepted that an ideal scientific theory consists of a set of theoretical constructs (or assumptions) systematically related to one another by coordinating definitions and a set of empirical definitions which permit the theorist to relate certain of his constructs to observable data. It is also generally accepted that the existing personality theories do not even approach the standards of an ideal scientific theory (Hall and Lindzey, 1970). They generally lack explicitness, they confuse statements about constructs or assumptions with empirical statements. They also usually contain statements referring to "popular" or "common sense" concepts; these are often used to persuade the reader rather than to explicate the theory.

One of the difficulties encountered in the attempted analysis is related to the state of theorizing in the field of personality and thus would be true of most, if not all, personality theories. In analyzing the theory of positive disintegration, it is sometimes difficult to decide whether a particular term or statement refers to a construct of the theory (that, is, whether

it is used in precisely defined technical sense) or to an empirical observation or, finally, whether it is used in a "popular" and presumably generally understood sense. In addition, it is sometimes difficult to translate the terms of a theory developed in a certain cultural tradition and context into the terms of another tradition and context. Even identical and similar terms may have different connotations in different cultural setting and they apparent similarity may only confuse some crucial distinctions. This problem would be particularly apparent in discussing the "popular" terms used to describe the theory. A related difficulty is the danger of misinterpreting and distorting the theory in the process of analysis.

The analysis is based on two books and one paper by Prof. Dabrowski (Dabrowski, 1964; Dabrowski, 1967; Dabrowski, The inner psychic milieu).

ANALYSIS OF THE THEORY

In spite of the apparent multitude and disconcerting diversity of personality theories, most personality theorists attempt to deal with a relatively limited number of basic problems or issues which are related to observation of some very general personality characteristics. As the first step in the analysis of the theory of positive disintegration it will be attempted to specify some of the most important issues in personality theory and then to state how the theory proposes to deal with them.

Personality theorists generally attempt to account for the following types of observations (at least) although any particular theorist may emphasize some of these problems at the expense of the other.

- (1) The problem of the continuity of some aspects of personality,
- (2) The problem of the changeability of personality,
- (3) The problem of longitudinal development; though this problem, may be much more important in some theories than in others, personality is generally viewed as -- in part, at least -- the product of development.

- (4) The problem of individuality (or uniqueness of the individual) and its description.

The above four problems are often referred to as the problems of personality structure, dynamics, development, and assessment respectively.

(5) In addition, some, but not all, personality theorists attempt to describe (or measure) the adequacy of personality. This is the problem of adjustment or mental health and illness. In the opinion of some writers, this problem is different in important respects from the other four problems, since it requires value judgments.

Personality structure.

In the theory of positive disintegration, personality appears to be divided into two basic systems: (1) a "primitive structure" and (2) the internal psychic environment (or milieu). The "primitive structure" consists of basic impulses (or instincts) biologically determined and operating according to the tension-reduction principle. The basic impulses are of two kinds: autotonic (or egocentric) and syntonic (or heterocentric).

The internal psychic environment appears as a result of the process of development; it seems to refer to one's inner or subjective world. It isn't clear whether it is meant to refer to the inner world as experienced by the individual himself, i.e., whether statements referring to it are introspective reports, or whether it is an inferred entity and, therefore, a theoretical construct. At times the theory speaks of the inner environment as experienced by the individual. On the other hand, a distinction is made between conscious and unconscious levels of activity, implying that some parts of the inner psychic environment are not accessible to introspection.

The internal psychic environment is by far the more important system and it is described and analyzed in great detail. First of all, and this is one of the crucial features of the theory of positive disintegration, it can be organized on different levels or, perhaps, in different ways. Four such levels or kinds are described: primitive, disintegrated, integrated, and pathological. The first three levels may represent stages in the individual development or terminal types of organization for some individuals. In addition, at least in the case of developed individual, the internal psychic environment is hierarchically organized at any give time. Two such levels are specified:

(1) The level of lower activities closely related to the basic impulses (perhaps consisting of psychological representations of biological needs, as in Freudian theory), and (2) the level of higher activities, consisting of socialized and moral aspects.

The internal psychic environment is also described as including various dynamisms; in fact, dynamisms seem to be the basic elements of the internal psychic environment. The term "dynamism" is not defined precisely and it is not clear whether it refers to a theoretical construct or to a popular term with a presumably generally understood meaning.

As used in the theory of positive disintegration, "dynamisms" seem to refer to any mental content or activity having a cognitive and -- usually, if not always -- an emotional component, and also having motivational properties, i.e., serving as a "force" which impels behavior and gives it direction.

Dynamisms are divided into three groups; each group is characteristic of a certain level of development. The reader is referred to the original papers for a detailed description of the dynamisms (e.g., Dabrowski, The inner psychic milieu). In the present paper the three groups of dynamisms will be identified and the major dynamisms will be discussed briefly.

(1) Dynamisms which are characterized by spontaneity and lack of a definite organization (first phase of multilevel disintegration).

(2) Dynamisms which reshape, assimilate and organize the process of positive disintegration.

(3) Dynamisms manifesting the prevalence of secondary integration.

The dynamisms which seem to be particularly important in the process of the development, of the individual are the following:

The "third factor" (or "agent"). Next to the hereditary and environmental influences, the development of an individual is said to be directed by the "third factor"--an internal factor which consciously directs one's development by evaluating and selecting certain internal and external values. It represents "auto-determination" and is distinguished from "heterodetermination" of the process of development. It would be tempting to equate it with the "self-sys-

tem" of other theories; however, the third factor is not a permanent structural part of personality. It is influential only during the periods of disintegration.

The "subject-object" dynamism. This dynamism refers to the ability and practice of self-observation and also apparently to the ability to judge certain aspects of internal environment as more or less desirable or acceptable. This dynamism would seem to imply the development of a "self" or a "self-concept." The term "self" occurs in the statement of the theory, but it does not seem to designate a construct of the theory. However, self-awareness and self-control represent another dynamism closely related to the subject-object dynamism.

The disposing and directing center. This is the dynamism^m which controls the activity of other dynamisms and in this sense seems to occupy a central position in the personality structure, perhaps comparable to the "ego" in the psychoanalytic theory. The disposing and directing center can be located at different levels at different times in the development of the individual, or, in other words, different dynamisms (or motives) may assume a leading role at different stages of the development.

The personality ideal. This dynamism consists of aims and desirable traits and characteristics, some of them common to the culture, other peculiar to the individual. As other dynamisms, the personality ideal acts as a "force"; its importance increases with the level of development.

Personality dynamics.

The description of personality dynamics in the theory of positive disintegration include several forces or influences, which sometimes act in opposition to one another and whose importance varies with the level of development.

Basic impulses (instincts). The original motivating force consists of basic impulses apparently closely related to biological needs. These impulses are of two kinds: autotonic (egocentric), as self-preservation,

power, and possession, and syntonic (heterocentric), as sympathy, sexual and social needs. As Mowrer points out in his introduction to Personality shaping through positive disintegration. (Dabrowski, 1967), the use of the term "instinct" is perhaps unfortunate and some of the "instinctual" behaviors would perhaps be interpreted by other psychologists in terms of learning and socialization.

The developmental instinct. This instinct occupies a particular position in the system of personality dynamics and is also even more controversial than the other instincts. Broadly speaking, it seems to represent a force which is responsible, in part at least, for the development of the individual or for his progress from lower to higher stages. It is thus comparable to the "force for growth" of the self-actualization theorists and shares the weaknesses of this concept. The developmental instinct acts in opposition to the basic impulses, is related to the development of the "Higher" stages discussed below.

Disintegration. This is the basic concept of the theory of positive disintegration. Briefly, the theory assumes that development progresses through stages and that the progress to a higher stage occurs when the organization typical of a lower stage is destroyed or at least weakened. Thus disintegration refers to the action of destructive forces and it may appear at first strange, if not paradoxical, to consider it as a factor in-growth.

Disintegration is described in terms such as: disorganization, fragmentation, loosening, and conflict. It seems that the concept of disintegration can be interpreted in two ways. On the one hand, it could be thought of as a process of differentiation followed by the integration of the fragmented parts. Mowrer (Dabrowski, 1967) on the other hand, equates it with the concept of conflict and this interpretation seems reasonable, since disintegration involves tensions among the fragmented parts.

Disintegration can be classified in various ways, of which the distinction between unilevel and multilevel disintegration, and the distinction between positive and negative disintegration are the most important. Accepting

Mowrer's interpretation, unilevel disintegration would refer to a conflict between forces on a single level, either a conflict between different impulses on the level of basic impulses, or a conflict between some socialized and moral consideration on the level of higher activities. Multilevel disintegration, on the other hand, would involve a conflict between the two levels, usually in the form of higher activities opposing and restraining the lower impulses. Positive disintegration would be related to the potential for growth and integration on a higher level, negative disintegration would have no such consequences. Mowrer points out in this context (Dabrowski, 1967), that it may be more profitable to speak of the positive or negative aspect of the responses to or consequences of disintegration, since the process of disintegration as such does not seem to differ materially in the two cases.

One of the basic questions concerning the process of disintegration is the question of the factors responsible for the onset of disintegration. According to the theory of positive disintegration, there seem to be two such factors: (1) the developmental instinct itself seems to initiate tensions and conflicts, at first between impulses, later between levels; (2) personal experiences, particularly stresses, may make it increasingly difficult to maintain a certain level of organization.

Dynamisms. The dynamisms were discussed in connection with the description of personality structure. Since they have motivational properties, or act as "forces", they are also important factors in the dynamics of personality.

Dynamisms become particularly important during the higher levels of development; in fact, one's level of development could perhaps be described in terms of the proportion of activities governed by dynamisms. As was stated above, different dynamisms are characteristic of different stages of development; the dynamism of personality ideal is particularly important at the highest level of development.

How can one account for the origin of dynamisms? The theory of positive disintegration is not very specific on this issue, apart of relating the

emergence of dynamisms to the process of positive disintegration. It seems that in part they may develop as a direct result of the action of the developmental instinct; in part they may represent sublimated basic impulses.

Personality development

The theory of positive disintegration is to a large degree a developmental theory and, therefore, this aspect is in many ways the basic part of the theory. The process of development seems to be characterized in the following way:

Development proceeds through a sequence of stages; the stages of primitive integration, positive disintegration, and secondary integration are described specifically. The stage of primitive integration represents an organization of personality on the level of primitive impulses; positive disintegration involves a fragmentation of this structure, a lessening of the influence of impulses, and an increase of the influence of the dynamisms of the internal psychic environment; finally, secondary integration would be characterized by a personality organization under the influence of the dynamism of personality ideal, i.e., values contained in the personality ideal are actualized in behavior.

The progress through the stages is not inevitable; a person may remain (become "fixated"?) at the lower stages.

Positive disintegration is considered a fundamental process in development. In order to progress to a higher stage of development, a lower level of organization must first be destroyed. This is perhaps the most important aspect of the theory of positive disintegration; it is a position that has some intuitive appeal and that has considerable support in the studies of creativity, which point out to the value of dissatisfaction in creative efforts. It is also a position that distinguishes the theory of positive disintegration from other theories. Most clearly, while some traditional theories consider conflict as inevitable and the personality organization as largely determined by the responses to conflict, few theorists would consider conflict and tension as actually desirable and as positive phenomena.

Is disintegration inevitable? Since some individuals remain on the level of primitive integration, it would seem that it is not. It will occur to the degree that an individual has a constitutional predisposition for it (perhaps related to the action and strength of the developmental instinct) and to the degree that he will encounter stresses in his life. The relationship between the process of disintegration and the instinct of development is one of the most important assumptions of the theory and one that needs further classification.

Personality description.

The theory of positive disintegration has not so far led to the development of methods of personality assessment and it seems more appropriate to speak of personality description rather than assessment.

The personality theorist has two traditional options in describing individuals, i.e., the type and the trait approach. The theory of positive disintegration clearly prefers the description in terms of types. We find two somewhat differing statements of typology arising out of the theory of positive disintegration. In the earlier statement (Dabrowski, 1964), four personality types are identified: the primitive integration type, the positive disintegration type, the chronic disintegration type, and the pathological disintegration type. The four types are distinguished on the basis of the progress of development and the nature of integration and disintegration.

In a later statement (Dabrowski, 1967) three types are mentioned: positive, negative, and mixed. The basis of the distinction is the prevalence of positive characteristics (presumably socialized and moral values), negative characteristics (presumably impulses), and an unsteady balance of these characteristics.

It should be noted that if primitive integration, positive disintegration, and secondary integration are considered matters of degree rather than

simply of presence or absence, the possibility of a trait description would exist. This possibility has apparently not been explored so far.

Personality adjustment.

It is in this field that the theory of positive disintegration makes some of its most important contribution. As it is generally known, with mental health being defined in negative terms as the absence of symptoms. It is only fairly recently that some psychologists have begun using the normal personality, or even "personality at its best" as a reference point and that the disease concept of adjustment has been challenged. The theory of positive disintegration clearly belongs to this more recent tradition.

Some of the more important positions of the theory with respect to mental health would seem to be as follows:

(1) emphasis on mental health and the development of healthy personality;

(2) the use of the personality ideal, which represents an embodiment of traits and values highly regarded by the culture, as one of the "forces" in personality development;

(3) a positive interpretation of tension, dissatisfaction, conflicts and even symptoms as factors in development; only disintegration with no potential for development and secondary integration is considered pathological;

(4) the specific reliance on self-education and autopsychotherapy as means of development.

THE THEORY OF POSITIVE DISINTEGRATION WITHIN THE
SPECTRUM OF PERSONALITY THEORIES

Now does the theory of positive disintegration compare with other personality theories and where should we place it on the broad spectrum of personality theories? A direct comparison with every major personality theory would be tedious and probably not very enlightening. We have to look for ways

of grouping or classifying personality theories according to some principle or principles and then attempt to place the theory of positive disintegration within such classification scheme. Fortunately several such ways of classifying personality theories have been suggested.

Classification by historical tradition.

This classification is probably not independent of the other classifications; for example, theories belonging in a certain tradition are likely to emphasize a certain psychological process at the expense of other processes. Still, it seems meaningful to speak of personality theories as falling into four broad groups: psychoanalytic theories, behavioristic theories, perceptual-cognitive theories, and humanistic - phenomenological theories (e.g. Pervin, 1970).

The theory of positive disintegration would seem to be most closely allied with the humanistic phenomenological tradition.

Classification by the nature of underlying psychological process (primarily motivation).

Although different theories emphasize different psychological processes (learning, perception, motivation), it is the assumption about motivation that seem to be most relevant to personality theory. Recently Lazarus (1969) suggested a threefold classification of personality according to the type of motivational model assumed: the tension-reduction model, (e.g. Freudian theory, the S-R learning theory), the tension-reduction-plus-other-principle model (e.g., White's competence theory), and the force-for-growth model (e.g., Rogers' and Maslow's self-actualization theory).

The theory of positive disintegration seems to assume that the tension-reduction principle governs the action of primitive impulses. However, this principle would be important only for people on the primitive integration level. For individuals on the higher levels of development, the importance of basic impulses is outweighed by far by the development instinct, which

is considered an innate tendency to perfection. Thus we are forced to conclude that the theory of positive disintegration used the force-for-growth model of motivation and relies on the tension-reduction principle only in relatively unusual circumstances.

Classification by the type of the formal model assumed.

In a recent discussion, Maddi (1968) concluded that all personality theories could be ordered into three categories, depending on the assumption that they make about basic influences in the formation of personality. The three categories are: the conflict model, which assumes an inevitable conflict between two forces, the fulfillment model, which assumes only one progressively developing force, and the consistency model, which views life as an attempt to maintain consistency between expectations and input from the environment. It is not always easy to place a personality theorist into one of these categories (although Maddi attempts to do so), and some theories seem to contain elements of at least two models.

Owing to the importance attributed to the developmental instinct which in turn is conceptualized as a tendency to mental and moral perfection, the theory of positive disintegration would seem to fit the fulfillment model best. It also contains strong elements of conflict, particularly at lower levels of development and furthermore, unlike the other fulfillment theories, it assigns positive value to conflict and even considers conflicts as an indispensable factor in growth. Perhaps it would be best to classify it as belonging basically to the fulfillment model, with strong elements of the conflict model.

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