

Using Dabrowski's Theory of Positive Disintegration To Understand
and Help Gifted Individuals

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to show how Kazimierz Dabrowski's Theory of Positive Disintegration developed in Poland in the 1930's and refined at The University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, over the past three decades, can be applied to understand the unique interplay of psychological forces that impact the gifted individual. For Dabrowski, development proceeds in a series of discrete stages from lower to higher, from external locus of control to internal locus of control, from impulsiveness to reflectiveness, from sociability to compassion, from concern about social norms to concern about ideal norms, from moral relativism to adoption of universal principles, from possessive and self-seeking love to all-embracing love. This paper introduces the basic components of Dabrowski's model. The implications of Dabrowski's models for giftedness and gifted individuals are discussed. Implications for assessment and counselling are also addressed.

Using Dabrowski's Theory of Positive Disintegration To Understand and Help Gifted Individuals

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of Kazimierz Dabrowski's Theory of Positive Disintegration, which was developed in Poland and refined at the University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. This theory presents a unique perspective on the role of conflict as a component of mental growth. It gives insight into the psychological functioning of gifted individuals. Despite the numerous writings on the model (Dabrowski, 1937, 1964, 1967, 1972, 1974; Dabrowski & Piechowski, 1977; Piechowski, 1975, 1978, 1979, 1986, 1989, 1991; Silverman, 1983), the Theory of Positive Disintegration has remained relatively obscure. We hope to communicate our understanding of the theory and its importance.

Developmental Potential

Characteristics of Development

For Dabrowski, development proceeds through five discrete stages or levels. Characteristics of the lowest level of development include: external locus of control, impulsiveness, cocktail party sociability, concern with social norms, moral relativism, and self-seeking love. Characteristics of the highest level of development include: internal locus of control, reflectiveness, compassion, concern with ideal norms, adoption of universal principles, and all-embracing love.

Levels of Development

Level I: Primary Integration

At this stage an individual is happily adapted to his or her environment. The individual is egocentric and most interested in obtaining personal pleasure.

Level II: Unilevel Disintegration

Still focused on the external world, the individual begins at Level II to experience ambivalence regarding the discrepancy between "what is" and "what ought to be." Although personal satisfaction is still the main motivating force of the Level II individual, the person begins to experience initial conflicts.

Level III: Spontaneous Multilevel Disintegration

At Level III, a person's realization of the wide discrepancy between the actual self and the ideal self leads to intense personal conflicts marked by feelings of inferiority, shame, and guilt. Although occasionally bolstered by positive evaluation on one's unique thinking process, the person at Level III is likely to suffer much psychic pain unless understood and appreciated.

Level IV: Organized Multilevel Disintegration

At Level IV, a person begins to take responsibility for one's actions and begins to consciously direct one's energy toward becoming the ideal self.

Level V: Secondary Integration

At Level V, the individual has internalized the ideal self and automatically strives each day to produce the highest good.

At this level, the individual has resolved the discrepancy between "what is" and "what ought to be." Level V is the highest level of development in the Theory of Positive Disintegration and achieved rarely.

Central Concepts of The Theory of Positive Disintegration

The extent to which an individual is capable of achieving high levels of development is a function of conditions for development, psychic overexcitabilities, and autonomous inner forces called dynamisms. The conditions for development are heredity, environment, and the extent to which the interaction between heredity and environment activates the autonomous inner forces. Heredity plays an important role since the possibility of interacting intensely with the world is dependent upon the inherent psychic overexcitabilities. Environment plays a critical role by providing stimulation of the overexcitabilities and pointing attention to the possibilities for high level functioning. The interaction between heredity and environment may activate dynamisms that are characteristic of various levels of development. A representation of the conceptual structure of the model is shown in Figure 1.

Psychic Overexcitabilities

The Theory of Positive Disintegration proposes that there are five channels of perception: psychomotor, sensual, intellectual, imaginal, and emotional that individuals use to experience the world. Psychomotor overexcitability is characterized by an excess of physical energy and hyperactivity.

Sensual overexcitability is characterized by extreme pleasure in using one's senses. Intellectual overexcitability is characterized by an intense interest in an individual's metacognitive processes. Emotional overexcitability is characterized by concern about one's relationships with others and the universe.

The Theory of Positive Disintegration proposes that there are individual differences in the amount and mixture of these overexcitabilities, which affect developmental potential. The presence of only psychomotor and sensual overexcitabilities limit developmental potential to Level I. Presence of emotional overexcitability is considered essential to reach Levels III, IV, and V. Conflicts arise as the various overexcitabilities seek expression.

Dynamisms

The theory of positive disintegration hypothesizes that the interaction between heredity and environment activate certain autonomous inner forces called dynamisms. A complete description of all the dynamisms is beyond the scope of this paper. Relevant dynamisms at Level II include "Ambivalence" and "Ambitendencies," which reflect initial conflict between "what is" and "what ought to be." Dynamisms activated at Level III "Dissatisfaction with Oneself", "Feelings of Shame", and "Feelings of Guilt" due to the individual's perceived discrepancy between external reality and the ideal. As one proceeds to Level IV, the dynamisms such as "Self-Awareness" and "Autonomy" can be characterized as providing

an individual with a sense of self-efficacy regarding the capability to resolve the inner conflict between the actual self and the ideal self. At Level V, a dynamism called the "Personality Ideal" is activated. As a result one achieves the ideal self, and thereby a state of harmony termed "secondary integration."

Implications For Giftedness

The Theory of Positive Disintegration has unique implications for anyone interested in the psychology and education of gifted individuals. First, the model proposes that the emotional overexcitability is of primary importance for reaching the highest level of development. The current dominance of the cognitive domain in gifted education in conjunction with neglect of the emotional domain is viewed as misguided. If the goal of gifted education is to foster the highest levels of development, it is essential to identify individuals with emotional overexcitability in addition to intellectual and/or imaginal overexcitability. A second implication of the theory is that gifted individuals are likely to suffer conflicts when they experience the discrepancy between "what is" and "what ought to be." Rather than viewing such conflicts as negative, the theory clearly views such existential struggles as positive indicators of developmental potential. Third, the model is consistent with a multidimensional conceptualization of giftedness. It should be noted, however, that it is the combination of the overexcitabilities that leads to the

manifestation of one's gifts.

Implications For Assessment

Current assessment procedures (Gage, Morse, & Piechowski, 1981; Lysy & Piechowski, 1983; Miller & Silverman, 1987) include open-ended questionnaires, interviews, case studies, and examination of autobiographical material to evaluate the presence of overexcitabilities, the presence of dynamisms and the indications of developmental levels. While such methods permit clinical insights into the psychological functioning of gifted individuals, they make it difficult to conduct research on theory validation and refinement. Objective assessment measures of the psychic overexcitabilities, dynamisms, and levels of development are needed in order to facilitate research on the Theory of Positive Disintegration.

Implications For Counselling

Several implications for counselling flow from Dabrowski's theory. A general implication refers to a "paradigm shift" vis a vis various aspects of counselling. Three specific areas that illustrate this script are: the role of the counsellor, counsellor effectiveness, and the focus of intervention.

Reframing the Counsellor's Role

In many approaches to counselling, the counsellor is implicitly or explicitly assisting clients in changing their behavior, attitudes, emotions, and expectations of self and other to adapt to societal norms. While there are exceptions (e.g. gestalt therapy and feminist therapy), the counsellor is the

agent of society whose major preoccupation is in helping the client adjust. The client is seen as requiring "fixing." Dabrowski's theory requires that the counsellor reverse this perception. What has traditionally been accepted as negative-- the client's symptoms -- are reconceptualized as positive indicators of developmental potential. Internal conflict, intense emotional experiencing, deep exclusive relationships with one or two individuals, all need recasting as necessary for growth.

A primary feature of a Dabrowskian counsellor is the didactic approach. A client is taught the elements of the Theory of Positive Disintegration to facilitate the client's self-acceptance and reinterpretation of symptoms and internal conflict. Crises are opportunities; disintegration is development.

Matching Client and Counsellor

Currently the accepted practice is to view the effectiveness of the outcome of counselling as a function of the appropriate matching of client and counselling approach. Counsellor effectiveness research now attempts to determine which counselling approach works best with which client and which presenting problems. Potential clients are encouraged to find counsellor's with whom they are most comfortable. The Theory of Positive Disintegration presents a novel way of understanding the matching of client and counsellor as indicative of successful outcome in counselling. Successful outcomes may be related to a

client seeking help from a counsellor at LEVEL III or Level IV. Perhaps, ineffective outcomes stem from a reversal of this situation--a higher level client meeting a lower level counsellor.

Centrality of Emotional Domain

The emotional overexcitability is essential for higher level development. This suggests that a counsellor needs to focus the intervention on the affective domain. A counsellor would initially assist the client to accept this aspect of the theory. Clinical experience suggests that regardless of presenting problems, clients seek professional assistance because they are overwhelmed by their emotions. It is important that the counsellor not minimize the client's experience. The counsellor should assist the client to see the emotional experience for what it is--a sign of disintegration, which is a precursor to a reorganization of personality. Once the client accepts the perception that disruption of current personality structures is a natural process of development, the client at Levels II and III might be confronted with how they might use the energy flowing from the current disequilibrium. Those in Levels II and III need assistance in channelling the energy derived from their developmental potential. Whereas traditional approaches foster symptom elimination as the goal of counselling, the Theory of Positive Disintegration views emotional expression as essential for mental health.

Summary

This paper presented an overview of Dabrowski's Theory of Positive Disintegration. In this model, developmental potential is a function of the conditions of development, the presence of psychic overexcitabilities, and the activation of autonomous inner forces called dynamisms. The basic components of the model were described. The implications for giftedness were discussed. Issues related to the assessment of critical components were noted. The implications for counselling were discussed.

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CONCEPTUAL STRUCTURE

Psychomotor
Sensual

Enhancing or
Limiting
Environment

LEVEL I

Psychomotor
Sensual
Intellectual
Imaginational

Enhancing or
Limiting
Environment

LEVEL II

Psychomotor
Sensual
Intellectual
Imaginational
Emotional

Limiting
Environment

LEVEL III

Psychomotor
Sensual
Intellectual
Imaginational
Emotional

Autonomous
Inner
Processes

LEVEL IV

V

Figure 1: CONCEPTUAL

STRUCTURE OF DABROWSKI'S THEORY