Kazimierz Dabrowski

The Theory of Positive Disintegration and Education.

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Calgary
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Kazimierz Dabrowski 1902-1980

- A Polish psychologist and psychiatrist.

- Deeply affected by his life experience, first in WW I.

- As an adolescent, saw life as hierarchical (ML) – saw people display wide variations in how they experience and feel life – some people seem to feel more. Experienced OE as a youth. Tried to explain why sensitive people hurt themselves – 1937 paper – S/M.

- Again, deeply affected by WW II – saw the "lowest & highest in man:" set out to create a theory to account for this wide range of human behavior & development.

- To see a biography and for more information: http://members.shaw.ca/positivedisintegration/

Dabrowski's Theory.

- Dabrowski wrote a broad, complex and subtle theory to account for human differences:

  - He integrated many diverse streams of thought, from philosophy, from literature, from psychology, from neurophysiology and from psychiatry.

  - Dabrowski's English works represent a sample of his overall publications (~ 2X as many in Polish).

  - As material is translated, more detail will emerge.

  - There has been some controversy in how some people interpret some of Dabrowski's concepts & confusion over what he said vs. the views of others.

Combination of Old and New Approaches.

- Dabrowski assembles old ideas in a unique way:
  - Subsumes a traditional Piagetian (cognitive) approach within an emotion based paradigm.
  - Combines essence and existential approaches.

- Dabrowski adds several new and unique concepts:
  - Multilevelness (ML)
  - Developmental potential (DP) (including overexcitability (OE)).
  - Positive Disintegration – In some cases, crises & "pathology" can act as triggers for development (positive & necessary for advanced growth but not sufficient).

A Philosophical & Psychological Approach.

- The theory combines two different philosophical traditions: elements of the essentialism of Plato with the emphasis on individual choice in existentialism.

- An individual's essence cannot just unfold, it must be consciously evaluated and developed – the lower aspects inhibited, the higher embraced – this ability is what differentiates humans from animals.

- Dabrowski is deeply concerned with the unique traits and personality of each individual. He asks us to develop & differentiate ourselves & to understand, appreciate & accept the differences of others.

Dabrowski's English Books.

- The titles of Dabrowski's six major English books reflect the major themes of his approach:
  - "Positive disintegration" (1964).
  - "Personality shaping through positive disintegration" (1967).
  - "Mental growth through positive disintegration" (1970).
  - "Psychoneurosis is not an illness" (1972).
  - "Dynamics of Concepts" (1973).
  - "Multilevelness of emotional and instinctive functions" (1996).

An Emotion – Value Based Approach.

- The theory is about values and moral behavior – what the individual perceives "ought to be" versus "what is."

- Our emotions are the ultimate guide to our value making and behaviour, not our intelligence.

- Values are individual but not relative – there are core objective (universal) values that authentic humans will independently discover and embrace as they build their own unique value systems and personalities.

- Education must not indoctrinate: ideally, it must prepare the child to appreciate the role of their emotions in building & guiding values & to be an autonomous thinker.

Emotion – a New Appreciation.

- The highest levels in traditional theories are based on cognition (e.g. Platonic Model, Piagetian model).

    - Traditional goal: to have reason control passion (Plato) – this goal and context has predominated.

- Dabrowski: Emotions are a very critical aspect of advanced development and of the higher levels:

    - Dabrowski differentiates higher & lower emotions.

    - Subsumes cognitive models under his emotion based approach (cog. models not discarded).

    - Dabrowski's observation: In "higher," authentic people, emotions guide individual values, define our sense of who we are and direct cognition.

Emotion and Development.

- Emotion anchors and guides the creation of autonomous and authentic human values.

- Based on how we feel, we develop a sense of what is higher / what ought to be over "what is:"
  - We move away from what feels bad / wrong / lower.
  - We move toward what feels good / right / higher.

- Emotion "uses" imagination and "directs" cognition to strive for what "ought to be" – for "higher possibilities:"
  - Intelligence becomes an instrument of our sense of our ideal personality, again based upon our emotional judgment of who we ought to be.

Development Is Limited.

- People dominated by their lower instincts appear to have little potential to develop or to change.

- People dominated by external factors (socialization) occasionally present potential to develop but social forces and peer pressure are strong and vigorously resist change.

- A few people appear to have strong autonomous potential to develop (can't be held back). Often go on to become exemplars of advanced development.

- Dabrowski found common traits in exemplars that he described as Developmental Potential (DP).

Developmental Potential (DP): Overview.

- Several complex and interrelated aspects to DP:
  - The three factors of development.
  - Dynamisms ["Biological or mental force controlling behavior and its development. Instincts, drives, and intellectual processes combined with emotions are dynamisms"]
  - Psychoneuroses and positive disintegration.
  - Emergent, internal features of the self [Hierarchy of aims & H. of values, Inner Psychic Milieu, etc.].
- A genetic feature that varies between individuals:
  - Most have too little DP to spur advanced growth.
  - A few have strong DP & achieve the highest levels.

- DP can be positive and promote development, negative and act to inhibit development, or be neutral.

Developmental Potential: Assessment.

- To assess DP, Dabrowski considered 3 main aspects:
    - Special talents & abilities (e.g. IQ, athletic ability).
    - Overexcitability (OE).
    - "Third Factor" (a strong internal drive to express one's unique self – factor of autonomous choice).

- Environment has limited effects if DP is strong:
    - Strong DP will overcome environmental factors.
- Environment has a major effect on outcome if DP is weak or neutral in character.

- DP is critical in determining the overall developmental course of an individual.

Three Factors of Development.

- Three factors influence behavior and development:

  - First Factor – expression of genetic instincts:
    - Most basic: primal biological & survival instincts.

      - Primitive, reflexive reactions and instincts.
      - Seen expressed in ego: Focus on self-satisfaction, to feel good, regardless of the cost to others.
      - Today, we could generalize to material success.

    - Complicated because lower instincts are genetic but so are the roots of higher DP.

Three Factors of Development.

- Second Factor – external influence: environment and socialization (includes existing education).

  - Incorporate & follow social values, rules & roles.

  - Moral authority & criteria for good behavior are derived from external (social) values.

  - Most people live life under the day-to-day influence of this factor – "good boy," "good girl."

  - Dabrowski rejected unreflective conformity and saw people who function primarily under social influence as "mentally unhealthy."

- "The autonomous factor of development"
  - "The third factor is the dynamism of conscious choice (valuation) by which one affirms or rejects certain qualities in oneself and in one's environment" (1972, p. 306).

- Third Factor often initially pits a person against him or her self & their social norms & initially may appear as unconformity:
  - "Do I blindly follow my instincts (First Factor), my teachings (Second Factor) or do I follow my heart (Third Factor) in rejecting what I feel is lower and embracing what I feel is higher, both externally & internally?"

The Third Factor – 2.

- A complex factor that arises from both genetic and social roots but later becomes autonomous:

  - Third factor becomes an emergent force, eventually expressing our sense of who we ought to be and controlling the direction of our development – transcends its genetic roots.

- As third factor develops, it compels us to make choices that express our authentic self – "more me" and to reject aspects that are "less me."

- More than just "will" – the third factor is the totality of our autonomous features and forces.

Overexcitability (OE) – 1.

- The best known aspect of DP is overexcitability – a trait that is usually not appreciated, often misunderstood and suppressed or "treated."

- In traditional attempts to "help" people in crises, OE is often framed as pathology & the individual is advised to "calm down," often with the aid of medication:
  - Dabrowski advocates supporting the person through their distress until they can understand and come to grips with their own unique personality traits and life circumstances.

Overexcitability – 2.

- A physiological property of the nervous system.

- Dabrowski described five types: psychomotor, sensual, intellectual, imaginational and emotional:

  - Latter "big 3" are critical for advanced development.

- "Sensitivity:" lower threshold in reacting to stimuli.

- "Intensity:" greater/higher ("over") reaction to stimuli.

- OE creates an intense and varied experience of life.

  - "Tragic Gift" – both highs and lows are intensified.
  - Often creates crises: Causes a person to question what they see in life: "Why is life like this?" "Why do people act that way?" Internal conflicts & existential crises are a common result.

- The "average" view of life is horizontal – unilevel:
  (Ken Wilber: "flatlanders", Bertalanffy and Yablonsky: "robopaths")

  - "Robots" blindly follow social roles & values.

  - "Animal model:" stimulus-response reactions.

  - Equal alternatives create "illusions of choice."

  - Conflicts between different but equivalent choices.

  - No vertical component to allow for higher growth.

- Development is linked to a "new," vertical, ML view:

  - Spurred by DP, begin to see higher possibilities in comparison to lower realities and lower alternatives.

  - Vertical view creates a hierarchical model of life, of values and of behavior – allows us to choose.

Multilevel and Multidimensional Analysis.

- Dabrowski uses a powerful type of analysis combining two approaches:
    - Multilevel approach (ML).
    - Multidimensional approach (MD).
        - Behavior involves an interaction of dimension and level.
        - MD & ML can be used together to examine/evaluate behavior.
    - Ken Wilber uses a similar approach – popular in the USA, called the "all quadrant approach."

Developmental Complexity.

- The level of development is not uniform across all dimensions within a person. People are often on different levels on different dimensions:
    - Commonly, a person may be at a high level cognitively & on a low level emotionally (& morally), sadly, this seems to be our social status quo.
    - Dabrowski called this one-sided development.
- What dimensions should we consider in our analysis?
    - Complicates our idea of levels & their assessment.
    - Current testing focuses on one or two dimensions (almost always cognitively based).
    - Dab. says: we need a richer, broader approach to measure human development & potentials.

Multilevelness As a Growth Process.

- In advanced development, our growing sense of the "higher possibilities" in life gives us personal goals to strive for: our own unique personality ideal.

- As a ML view develops, it causes vertical conflicts – once the higher alternative is seen, acting on the lower creates guilt, unhappiness, feelings of inferiority:

  - Vertical conflicts become a vital, internal driving force of individual (personality) change.

    - We must demote our lower impulses, reflexes & reactions based on selfishness and socialization. We must promote our own carefully considered, individually based responses arising from our own values and our vision of how things ought to be.

The Role of Crises in Life.

- In a person with high DP(OE), the normal events of life lead to intense experiences and frequent crises.

- Crises and disintegrations are necessary but not sufficient to create growth – only create *opportunities*.

- Crises do not *guarantee* growth – outcome depends on the strength of the developmental potential and on other factors (a supportive & positive environment).

- Crises are needed to break down initial integrations & help drive growth: dis - ease motivates change.

- The appearance of internal and vertical self-conflicts mark pronounced development – the struggle of lower versus higher values and behaviors within us, creates internal conflicts that spur on change and growth.

Internal Conflict.

- Internal conflict – the driving force of development:
  - Internal is conflict is low where there is strong primary integration & also low where there is strong secondary integration (person is true to self & feels no internal strife).
  - Internal conflict is maximum during disintegration.
- There may be external conflicts at any level.

Degree of Internal Distress

II

III

IV

I

V

Developmental Levels
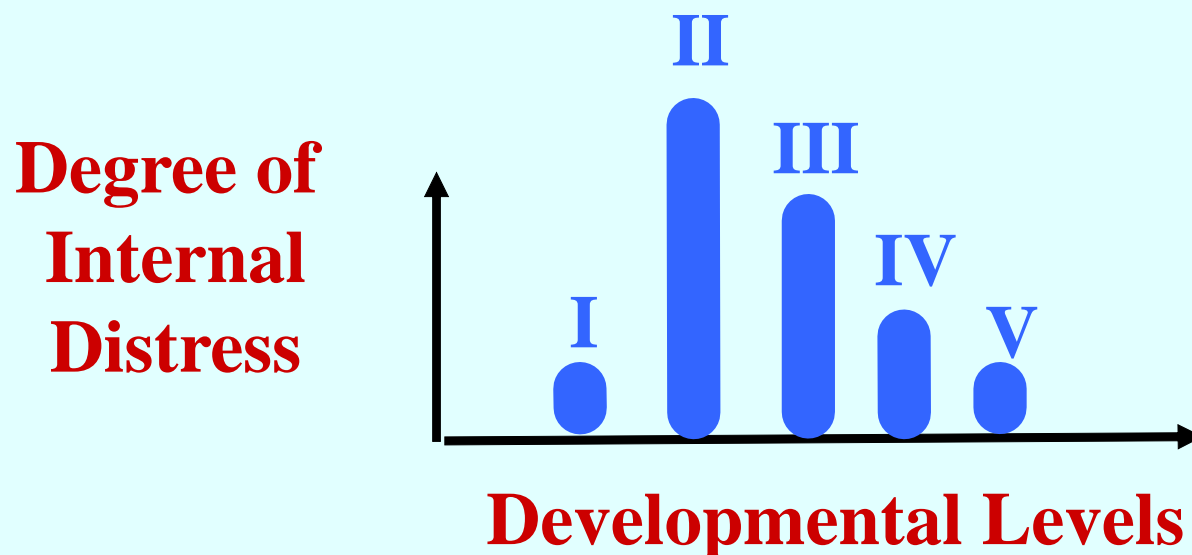
Psychoneuroses.

- Dabrowski sees a positive role for psychoneurosis (PN) in growth and creativity – a largely unique view.

- Dabrowski differentiated lower vs. higher neuroses:

  - Neurosis – more physical, lower features (tics).

  - Psychoneurosis – more mental, "higher" symptoms. Anxiety & depression are the primary PN.

  - High anxiety and depression are common features of growth – for Dabrowski, often "symptoms" of PD.

    - Definition of PN: "more or less organized form of growth through PD" (1972).

  - Symptoms must be diagnosed by looking at the overall context, DP & other traits of the individual.

Adjustment – 1.

- Dabrowski outlined four types of adjustment:
    - 1). Negative maladjustment – antisocial, selfish ego dominates behavior that flaunts social mores:
        - Expression of primitive first factor: criminals, unscrupulous CEOs (see themselves above law).

    - 2). Negative adjustment – ordinary socialization:
        - "Robotic" & uncritical acceptance of what is.
        - Adjustment to prevailing social norms & values.
        - Expression of second factor – we are social conformers: antisocial & primitive impulses are repressed so we will "fit in" (so is our autonomy).
        - Adjustment to a "sick" society is to also be sick.

Two Types of Adjustment.

- 1). Negative adjustment – ordinary socialization:
    - "Robotic" and uncritical acceptance of what is.
    - Adjustment to prevailing social norms & values.
    - Second factor – social conformity: antisocial & primitive impulses are repressed (so is our autonomy) in order to "fit in."
    - Adjustment to a "sick" society is to also be sick.
- 2). Positive adjustment – adjustment to inner sense of what ought to be & to consciously chosen values (behavior reflects highest possible values):
    - Full expression of third factor / personality ideal.
    - Seen at Level V – secondary integration.
    - Ideal society: everyone is at this level.

Two Types of Maladjustment.

- 3). Positive maladjustment – rejection of what is, in favor of what ought to be – where we see PN:
    - Initial expression of third factor (autonomy).
    - Pits one against social norms and mores – often confused as "ordinary" antisocial maladjustment.
    - May be seen in gifted students (but mislabeled).

- 4). Negative maladjustment – antisocial, selfish ego dominates behavior that flaunts social mores:
    - Expression of unrestrained first factor: criminals, unscrupulous CEOs (see themselves above law).

Positive Disintegration.

- Definition: "loosening, disorganization or dissolution of mental structures and functions" (1970, p. 164).

- "Positive when it enriches life, enlarges the horizon, and brings forth creativity, it is negative when it either has no developmental effects or causes involution" (1964, p. 10).

- Recovery from crisis can lead to a return to the former level and former equilibrium or to a more healthy integration & new equilibrium on a higher level.

- If the person has strong developmental potential, even severe crises can be positive and lead to growth.

Dabrowski's Level I.

- Dabrowski believed that the majority (about 65-85%) of people live life at Level I – Primary Integration:
  - A very stable, integrated, horizontally based level.
  - Behavior often automatic, reflexive, rote, unthinking.
  - Instinct (first factor) and social forces (second factor) dominate and influence behavior.
  - A difficult level to break free of: integration creates a strong sense of belonging and security ("security of the herd").
  - Inner harmony: the only conflicts are external, inner sense of "always being right," of selfish entitlement, don't worry about the other guy's problems.

Dabrowski's Levels – II, III and IV.

- 3 levels describe varying degrees of disintegration:
  - Level II - Unilevel Disintegration: Horizontal conflicts create ambiguity and ambivalence. Very stressful, chaotic period, maximum dis - ease:
    - High risk of falling back or falling apart.
    - Dabrowski described this as a transitional level.

- Paradigm shift: first multilevel, vertical aspects appear.
  - Level III - Spontaneous ML Disint.: Multilevel, vertical conflicts arise spontaneously, creates disint.
  - Level IV - Organized ML Disint.: We now see and actively seek out vertical conflicts, we play a volitional role in "directing" crises & development.

Paradigm Shift from UL to ML.

- Transition to a ML perspective is the "Greatest step." Dabrowski said that the shift from the unilevel to the vertical perception of life is the key to development.

  - Once one truly sees and appreciates the vertical, there is no turning back to a unilevel existence.

  - Dabrowski compared this with Plato's cave: once a person breaks free and sees the sunlight, they can no longer be happy living in the darkness.

  - The shift takes tremendous energy & places major demands on the person: they may feel alienated and be overwhelmed with depression and despair.

Dabrowski's Level V.

- Level V - Secondary Integration:

  - A ML description of the Human personality ideal.

  - Integration based on individual hierarchy of values.

  - Third factor promotes autonomous, volitional, unselfish – "good person" – as this is what is right.

  - Exemplars describe and show us this highest level.

  - Inner harmony: we are satisfied that our values & behavior now reflect our "true" self as we feel it ought to be – no *internal* conflict.

  - May still have *external* conflict – strong sense of social justice often motivates social action & reform.

  - Rarely seen (but the future trend in evolution [?]).

Dabrowski and Maslow.
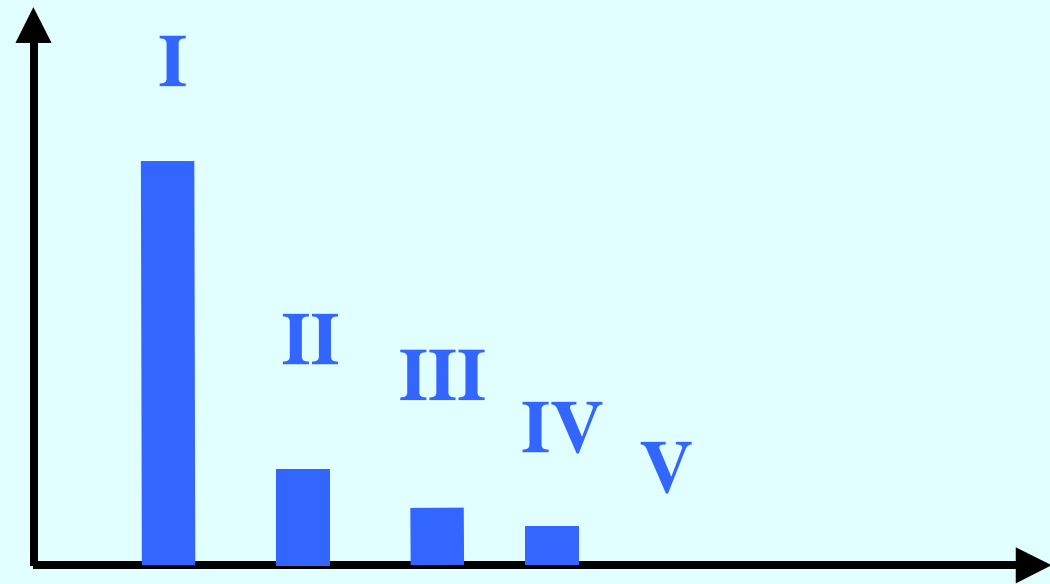
- Maslow & Dab. agree: Self has levels, has essence and DP. Both focus on individually derived values and internal, autonomous motivation.

- Disagree over nature of Self-actualization (SA) – Maslow: SA is a guiltless expression of one's full potential.

    - Should express both the lowest & highest levels.

        - Maslow: We first need to be "good animals."

    - Maslow's hierarchy: satisfying lower needs first allows us to focus on actualizing higher levels.

    - Focus is on what one *can* be, not on ideals or "oughts." We need to see reality as it is (not as it could be) & accept our shortcomings without having anxiety or guilt over them.

- Maslow: Saw neurosis as a blockage to growth & SA.

Multilevelness and Creativity.

- The expression of creativity reflects the developmental level of the person:
  - At lower levels, creative efforts are applied in the service of selfish ends (the master criminal, the unscrupulous corporate CEO) or, creativity is in the service of social and political goals (build a better nuclear bomb).

  - At higher levels, creative efforts are an expression of the individual's deep sense of who they are and how they see the world:
    - Reflects compassion, emotion, empathy, authenticity and "the better angels of our nature" (Lincoln).

Cognition Versus Emotion in Education.

- Education traditionally is based on cognitive models:
  - Very old tradition – Socrates, Plato & Aristotle:
    - Example; Plato saw emotion as disruptive & confusing to learning (emotion impairs cognition).
      - Cognition: reflects "mind" & higher "noble" goals.
      - Emotion: reflects body & lower impulses/desires.
  - View cemented by early I.Q. tests & Piaget's work.
  - Focus on: cognition, memory and rote performance.
  - (Psychology & psychiatry also have cognitive bias).

- Minor exceptions in education have been seen:
  - Waldorf schools based upon Rudolf Steiner's work.
  - Montessori Method (Maria Montessori).

Criticisms of Traditional Education.

- Education creates intelligent "robots:"
  - History shows "Intelligence" alone is not sufficient to ensure healthy decision making and behavior.
- Dabrowski: Education tends to "train" not educate. Creates a society of conformers & "social achievers" that follow group based mores, not individuals with minds (personalities) of their own.

  - Education is wrongly used to promote political and social values and goals, for example to promote consumerism and material wealth.
  - Today, individual achievement is valued over individual character.

Goals of Ideal "Dabrowskian" Education.

- Self-awareness; Global, empathetic & durable attitudes; Personal hierarchy of values & ideals.

- Goal: the creation of unique individuals, capable of autonomous thought & self analysis based on an integration of feelings about issues & person's thoughts about issues (not a rote recital of "the facts" or of prevailing social mores).

- Teach people how to critically evaluate issues & foster individual autonomy – help individuals to develop autonomous values & unique personality.

- Establishes a new hierarchy where emotion "directs" cognition, intelligence serves higher values.

Source of this material: Dabrowski, K.
On Authentic Education. Unpublished manuscript (not dated).

Dabrowski's Basic Approach:

- Education must strive to nourish the whole individual including both cognitive and emotional aspects.

  - Emotional aspects can have a dramatic impact on learning style, learning potential and performance.

  - The students potential must be seen in the context of their *overall personality*; within the classroom, family and society. Their performance and behavior must be viewed and evaluated in this context as well.

TPD and Education.

- Dabrowski advocated "humanistic education, that is, true human education and not mere training as the methods of an animal trainer might be described."

- Emphasizes that children are unique:
  - Two avenues to achieve education:
    - 1). General education designed to enhance common traits that all kids share,
    - 2). Specialized education focused on the unique traits of each child.

- "Authentic education is designed to encourage the child to transgress mediocre statistical qualities and to develop his own hierarchy of values and aims which he is then taught to realize."

Implications for All Students.

- Students need to be individually supported and nurtured on both emotional and cognitive dimensions.

- When a Dabrowskian diagnosis supports a positive interpretation, "symptoms" should be accepted:

  - OE should be tolerated: Dabrowski – "We must forgive each other our psychological type."

  - Crises should be expected and framed in a developmental context when appropriate.

- The rich tradition of ML and other OE individuals can be emphasized to reduce feelings of alienation.

TPD and the Gifted – 1.

- Today's application to the gifted field is largely based upon a study Dabrowski conducted with children:
  - Presented an appendix to his 1967 book.
  - Examined 80 children: 30 intellectually gifted and 50 from "drama, ballet and plastic art schools" (p. 251, 1967).
  - Found 'every child' showed 'hyperexcitability,' various psychoneurotic symptoms and frequent conflicts with the environment.

- In the manuscript, *On Authentic Education*, Dabrowski says:
  - "The nervous and psychoneurotic individual is present in an overwhelming percentage of highly gifted children and youths, artists, writers, etc. [The] tendency to reach beyond the statistical norm and mediocre development presents the privilege and drama of psychoneurotic people."

  - Conclusion: "The development of personality with gifted children and young people usually passes through the process of positive disintegration" (1967, p. 261).

Hypothesis for Gifted Students.

- Hypothesis: as a group, students identified as gifted will tend to display stronger DP (& OE), increased levels of psychoneuroses, and will be predisposed to experience positive disintegration:
  - Many students will display "symptoms" that may reflect higher potentials:
    - May display unusual sensitivity, frequent crises, anxieties, depression, perfectionism, etc.
    - May express strong positive maladjustment:
      - Strong sense they are different, don't fit in.
      - Have conflicts with social (unilevel) morality.
      - Feel alienated from others, from their peers.

The Measurement of OE.

- Dabrowski tried to develop many diverse tests of DP.

- Piechowski went on to develop a test of OE (OEQ), (not a test of full DP):

  - (Lysy, K. Z., & Piechowski M. M. (1983). Personal Growth: An empirical study using Jungian and Dabrowskian measures. Genetic Psych Monographs, 108, 267-320.)

- Ackerman found problems with the OEQ:

  - Ackerman, C. (1997). A secondary analysis of research using the Overexcitability Questionnaire. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Texas A&M University, College Station, Texas.)

- A revised test, the OEQ-II, has been developed:

  - Falk, R. F., Lind, S., Miller, N. B., Piechowski, M. M., & Silverman, L. K. (1999). The Overexcitability Questionnaire-Two (OEQII): Manual, Scoring System, and Questionnaire. (Available from the Institute for the Study of Advanced Development, 1452 Marion St., Denver, CO 80218).

- Research/development continues on this front.

- Hypothesis: individuals displaying high DP & those identified as gifted will constitute two overlapping subgroups found within the larger population:

Identified as gifted, but little DP seen (24%).

General Population
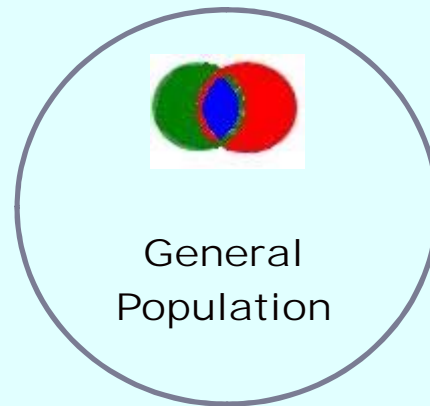
Not identified as gifted but DP is seen (35%).

Overlap: those identified as gifted & show DP.

- **From Ackerman (1997) – She seems to assume the 35% with higher DP *must* be gifted but have not been identified by conventional means.**

  - **Dabrowski: we can have DP & not be gifted.**

- Mendaglio and Tillier (2006) reviewed the literature.

  - Mendaglio, S., & Tillier, W. (2006) Dąbrowski's theory of positive disintegration and giftedness: Overexcitability research findings. *Journal for the Education of the Gifted, 30*(1), 68-87.

- Pyryt reviewed the research findings concluding that gifted individuals are more likely than those not identified as gifted to show signs of intellectual OE, but based upon the research strategies and testing done to date, the gifted do not consistently demonstrate "the big three," intellectual, imaginational and emotional OE. Pyryt (2008) concluded, "it appears that gifted and average ability individuals have similar amounts of emotional overexcitability. This finding would suggest that many gifted individuals have limited developmental potential in the Dąbrowskian sense and are more likely to behave egocentrically rather than altruistically" (p. 177).

  - Pyryt, M. C. (2008). The Dąbrowskian lens: Implications for understanding gifted individuals. In S. Mendaglio (Ed.), Dąbrowski's theory of positive disintegration (pp. 175-182). Scottsdale AZ: Great Potential Press, Inc.

- The metaanalysis of the last 20 years of research calls for the reappraisal of the conclusion that as a group, the gifted disproportionately display overexcitability compared to non-gifted groups.

- Current research measures OE but not DP.

- Can OE act as a marker for giftedness?

- Do the gifted disproportionately demonstrate other signs of developmental potential, for example, the third factor?

- This question remains unresearched.

Research Poses Problems.

- **The hypothesis that the gifted will also display higher levels of positive disintegration remains untested.**

- **Research suggests that gifted students do not display higher anxiety, depression or suicide (Neihart 1999):**

  - If it is true that gifted have higher OE as a group, why don't they appear to have more PN and go through PD as Dabrowski's theory would predict?