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## COUNTERPOINT

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# Dabrowski Without the Theory of Positive Disintegration Just Isn't Dabrowski

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Dabrowski's theory of positive disintegration (K. Dabrowski, 1964, 1967, 1970, 1972, 1973) has been the subject of a number of research projects in the gifted field over the past 20 or so years (for a recent review, see Mendaglio & Tillier, 2006). Most of this research has focused on Dabrowski's idea of overexcitability and has not discussed the broader context or implications of his theory or overall approach to personality development. This is like trying to appreciate a symphony orchestra by only listening to one instrument play. When researchers have attempted to give some background, information presented has often failed to represent Dabrowski's original material well. Initially, Dabrowski's English publications were difficult to obtain and it was sometimes a challenge for researchers to present an accurate portrayal of Dabrowski's overall approach. Now that Dabrowski's 2000 or so pages of English material are widely available (Tillier, 2007), it is disappointing to see basic conceptual misunderstandings of Dabrowski's theory still appearing. The recent article by Tieso (2007) presents several statements about Dabrowski's approach that need to be challenged.

Tieso (2007) says "Dabrowski (1964), through his work with genius and depravity during the rise of Fascism in Europe, identified five special kinds of intensities or characteristics that seemed to help determine to what level of moral development one would ascend" (p. 232). It is important for readers to realize that Dabrowski's focus was not on "genius" per se; it was on exceptional personality development and thus he studied individuals whom he judged as showing exemplary personality growth. Also, although Dabrowski endured considerable personal hardship during his wartime experiences and was certainly exposed to human depravity, he did not do "work" in this area. Though the five overexcitabilities

contribute to overall personality growth, and though moral development is part of this overall development, Dabrowski's work is not a theory of moral development.

Tieso (2007) goes on to say, "The concept of Psychic Overexcitabilities grew out of Dabrowski's original concept of development potential—a theory that evolved from his work with gifted individuals under conditions of extreme stress" (p. 232). Again, this statement deserves clarification. The concept of overexcitability did not "grow out of" Dabrowski's idea of development potential; rather, overexcitability was always a key component (one of several) used to define and measure the larger concept of development potential. The theory of positive disintegration did involve an evolution of sorts over Dabrowski's lifetime, but it was not from his work with gifted individuals. Gifted individuals constituted a small minority of his patients and research subjects. Dabrowski's only research reports specifically on gifted students involved a Polish report of some 175 students (1986)<sup>1</sup> and a second study reported in his 1967 and 1972 English publications involving approximately 80 students. Dabrowski observed and studied

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<sup>1</sup>Dr. E. Mika (August 20, 2007) provided the following translation from page 24 of Dabrowski 1986:

With a group of my collaborators, I assessed, in Poland and Canada, 175 individuals (children and youth from elementary and high schools, and college), with special attention to students of art schools. They were selected as the most talented by their teachers. It turned out that 85% of them showed states of increased psychic excitability, neuroses and psychoneuroses from light to the most severe. At the same time, we assessed 30 patients with oligophrenia [mental retardation] with a mental level from imbecile to mildly retarded. In none of them we found any clear, typical psychoneurosis or increased psychic excitability of the emotional or imaginal type. It appears that this data shows very clearly a correlation between OE, psychoneurosis and special talents and abilities.

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Received July 18, 2008; accepted November 15, 2008.

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the lives and autobiographies of great and eminent personalities including artists, but this group was certainly not selected or identified as gifted as a whole. Many of his patients and subjects were from mental institutions (Dabrowski provided services for institutionalized patients all of his life), most identified as experiencing psychoneuroses—what we would today call depression and anxiety, usually involving major components of existential crises and severe internal conflicts.

The 80 students in the study (Dabrowski, 1972) were not chosen or identified as being under any particular stress at the time; they were simply chosen because of their placement in the school. Likewise, Dabrowski's other subjects were not studied under conditions of extreme stress; rather, their life histories as a whole were examined. Dabrowski's theory is not based on the idea of how people respond to extreme stress; it is based upon the idea that individuals, some of whom will be gifted, some not, who possess a constellation of factors representing strong developmental potential, including the overexcitabilities, will respond to and perceive day-to-day life in a different manner than the average person. The theory proposes that their responses will predispose these individuals to develop a multilevel perspective, fully activating the process of positive disintegration, and this process leads to overall personality development.

Tieso (2007) states that “[Dabrowski's] theory comes from the rise of extremism between the first two World Wars and his rejection of the Freudian view that adult neuroses were brought on by childhood trauma” (p. 232). Again to clarify, the impetus of the theory was not political; Dabrowski's interest was in understanding the experiences and plight of exceptional individuals. It appears that this interest was likely spawned during Dabrowski's college days by the suicide of his close friend. Before this event, Dabrowski was contemplating a career as a professional musician. Dabrowski embarked on the historical study of individuals and societies and quickly realized that societies do not represent or exemplify the pinnacle of authentic human development. Nor does the average individual; Dabrowski observed that only a few individuals seem to display the characteristics he associated with authentic human development. Further, it was immediately clear that these exceptional individuals displayed very deep conflicts, anxieties, and depressions. During their developmental crises, which could last for years, suicide was a real threat, in part due to the mutual alienation of these individuals from their society and much of Dabrowski's early research was focused on self-mutilation and suicide (C. Dabrowski, 1937; K. Dabrowski, 1929). This alienation, positive maladjustment in the theory, is another critical component of autonomous development; as the person's sense of individual personality ideal develops, it comes into conflict with his or her prevailing social mores and values. Dabrowski went on to study the lives of these individuals looking for more commonalities and discovered that their histories

invariably contained several key features inextricably linked to their development. Dabrowski elaborated these features into the primary aspects of developmental potential (including the concept of overexcitability) and the idea of positive disintegration and the positive developmental role of psychoneuroses—all important features contributing to the process of personality growth in these individuals. Dabrowski's objection to Freud did not focus primarily on the origin of neuroses but on their role in development. Freud presented and helped establish the traditional view that neuroses (and psychoneuroses) are blockages and impediments that must be resolved in order to allow growth. Dabrowski took the radical new view that neuroses and psychoneuroses are necessary, indispensable components of development, required to break down initial social integrations in order to allow for the subsequent construction of higher and more sophisticated autonomous personality structures.

A basic grasp of Dabrowski's approach is important in creating the context necessary to understand how overexcitability may affect the individual or, in this forum, the gifted individual. Again, Tieso (2007) fails to portray Dabrowski's basic approach accurately when she says:

He theorized that during times of great stress or crisis, individuals highest in emotional intensity, would suffer a more pronounced kind of pain than those of normal temperament. He further suggested that this pain would lead to a “positive disintegration” of one's current developmental level to ascend to a higher level of moral functioning. Those with the most intense feelings (e.g., feelings of differentness or inadequacy, inner conflict, or shame and guilt) could reach the highest level of development. (p. 232)

Overexcitability tends to exaggerate an individual's experience of life; Dabrowski called it “the tragic gift” because it amplifies both the high, happy, and joyful moments as well as the lowest and saddest life events. The day-to-day life events that one experiences are the raw material for this amplification, not necessarily times of great stress; on the other hand, these ordinary day-to-day life events may generate great stress when amplified by overexcitability. For example, an overexcitable child seeing a dead bird on the sidewalk may have a major stress reaction, even an existential crisis. The experience of stress or crisis does not lead to development; overexcitability creates stress and crises that, in combination with other developmental factors, lead to internal conflict. Strong internal conflicts focus the individual's attention toward his or her responses to the external environment and to his or her inner psychological experience. Eventually, internal conflicts come to display a vertical (multilevel) component—the hallmark of their resolution and of development; for Dabrowski, the only developmental solutions are vertical, lifting the individual toward higher levels of function. Likewise, it is not the experience of pain or suffering or the intensity of emotions per se that leads to growth, it is

the individual's consequent self examination and emerging insight into day-to-day life and a deeper, more conscious and multilevel understanding of his or her reactions. Thus, the individual develops a multilevel perspective on life that includes an appreciation for the higher elements and a deeper empathy and compassion for the lower. The individual also brings into focus his or her personality ideal and resolves to accentuate the higher aspects in his or her personality (and reactions) and inhibit and repress the lower, thus moving him or herself toward his or her personality ideal (personality shaping). This new worldview combined with the other aspects of developmental potential—for example, a very strong innate sense of the need for autonomy, a feature Dabrowski referred to as the third factor—are the driving forces and ultimate determinants of development, not the intensity of the feelings involved as suggested by Tieso.

A final example calls for clarification. Tieso (2007) says: "Dabrowski hypothesized that these characteristics of overexcitability were more prevalent in gifted individuals than in the general population, and he suggested that they may lead to higher levels of moral development in gifted individuals" (p. 232). To return to Dabrowski's gifted research (1967, 1972), the subjects were "80 children, of whom 30 were generally intellectually gifted (from elementary schools), and 50 were children and young people from art schools (theatre, ballet, and art)" (K. Dabrowski, 1972, p. 203). After extensive assessment, Dabrowski (p. 205) concluded that "Every one of the children investigated showed considerable psychomotor, sensual, affectional, imaginal, and intellectual mental overexcitability." However, it is important to emphasize again that Dabrowski had a broader focus when thinking about this group, as expressed in the following hypothesis: "High level of general and special abilities correlates positively with mental disequilibrium, nervousness, neuroses, and psychoneuroses" (K. Dabrowski, 1970, p. 141). Dabrowski did not look at overexcitability in isolation; he always considered a constellation of developmental factors and the following quote illustrates the interaction between developmental potential, overexcitability, and psychoneuroses that sets the stage for advanced development: "Each individual has his own special kind of developmental potential. This developmental potential is individually and concretely coupled with a form (or forms) and level of excitability or psychoneurosis, or both, in a set which is for the most part positive but not without its characteristic developmental dangers" (K. Dabrowski, 1972, p. 210).

Dabrowski concludes:

We think that we shall have reached our goal if this work will focus attention on the positive relation between the development of superior abilities and talents and the development of psychoneuroses in the direction of their higher forms. The practical conclusions may be drawn by psychiatrists, psychologists, educators and all those dealing with the problem of outstanding abilities. Such an approach, if

accepted by the centers deciding about our education and culture could bring it about that nervous and psychoneurotic individuals would suffer less from unnecessary tension operating on lower levels, and from other negative dynamisms related to psychoneuroses and enhanced by wrong attitudes in relation to psychoneurotics. (1972, p. 219)

One important implication of this conclusion is that when discussing individuals with "superior abilities and talents," Dabrowski's main concern and focus was on the overall developmental process (not simply overexcitability) in this group and on how we as a culture and specifically as educators can help improve our understanding and attitudes about psychoneurotic phenomena and thus reduce the persecution and alienation of this group.

## CONCLUSION

Dabrowski presents a broad and complex theoretical approach to personality development in general that may also be relevant to understanding the experiences and development of gifted individuals. Research that does not accurately portray this larger context makes it difficult for readers to accurately judge research findings or the applicability of Dabrowski's approach. Dabrowski's theory also includes some tantalizing hypotheses concerning gifted individuals. Over the past 20 years, overexcitability in gifted individuals has been examined. Dabrowski's hypotheses concerning the contribution from other forms of developmental potential (including third factor and the dynamisms of development), the nature of development, and the role of psychoneuroses and positive disintegration in this group await further testing.

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## AUTHOR BIO



**Bill Tillier** received a Bachelor's of Science from the University of Calgary and later a Master's of Science from the University of Alberta. In Edmonton he became Dr. Dabrowski's student and became deeply involved in his work. Tillier had a career as a forensic psychologist before retiring due to illness. He now volunteers for Muscular Dystrophy Canada and the Canadian Paraplegic Association. Dabrowski asked Tillier to keep his theory alive and he received his unpublished papers. He maintains a Dabrowski Web page (<http://www.positivedisintegration.com>), promotes and distributes his original works, and helps with Dabrowski conferences. E-mail: [bill@positivedisintegration.com](mailto:bill@positivedisintegration.com)