

Positive Disintegration

The **Theory of Positive Disintegration (TPD)** by Kazimierz Dąbrowski describes a theory of personality development.

Unlike mainstream psychology, Dąbrowski's theoretical framework views psychological tension and anxiety as necessary for growth. These "disintegrative" processes are therefore seen as "positive," whereas people who fail to go through positive disintegration may remain for their entire lives in a state of "primary integration." Advancing into disintegration and into the higher levels of development is predicated on having developmental potential, including overexcitabilities and above-average reactions to stimuli.

Unlike some other theories of development such as Erikson's stages of psychosocial development, it is not assumed that even a majority of people progress through all levels. TPD is not a theory of stages, and levels do not correlate with age.

Dąbrowski's theory

Kazimierz Dąbrowski (1902–1980), a Polish psychiatrist and psychologist, developed the Theory of Positive Disintegration over his lifetime of clinical and academic work. The Theory of Positive Disintegration is a novel approach to personality development. Wikipedia:Citation needed

Dąbrowski's theory of personality development emphasized several major features including:

- personality is not a given universal trait, it must be created—shaped—by the individual to reflect his or her own unique character (personality shaping)
- personality develops as a result of the action of developmental potential (DP) (overexcitability and the autonomous factor), not everyone displays sufficient DP to create a unique personality.
- developmental potential is represented in the population by a normal (bell) curve. Dąbrowski used a multilevel approach to describe the continuum of developmental levels seen in the population.
- developmental potential creates crises characterized by strong anxieties and depressions—psychoneurosis—that precipitate disintegration
- for personality to develop, initial integrations based on instinct and socialization must disintegrate—a process Dąbrowski called positive disintegration
- the development of a hierarchy of individual values — emotional reactions — is a critical component in developing one's personality and one's autonomy, thus, in contrast to most psychological theories, emotions play a major role in this approach
- emotional reactions guide the individual in creating his or her individual personality ideal, an autonomous standard that acts as the goal of individual development
- the individual must examine his or her essence and subsequently make existential choices that emphasize those aspects of essence that are higher and "more myself" and inhibit those aspects that are lower or "less myself" based upon his or her own personality ideal
- critical components of individual development include autoeducation and autopsychotherapy

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http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Positive_disintegration

Factors in development

Dąbrowski observed that most people live their lives in a state of "primary or primitive integration" largely guided by biological impulses ("first factor") and/or by uncritical endorsement and adherence to social convention ("second factor"). He called this initial integration Level I. Dąbrowski observed that at this level there is no true individual expression of the autonomous human self. Individual expression at Level I is influenced and constrained by the first two factors.

The first factor channels energy and talents toward accomplishing self-serving goals that reflect the lower instincts and biological ego — its primary focus is on survival and self-advancement. Often talents are used in antisocial or asocial ways. For example, at the lowest edge of Level I many criminals display this type of selfish behavior. They advance their own goals at the expense of others.

The second factor, the social environment (milieu) and peer pressure, constrains individual expression and creativity by encouraging a group view of life and discouraging unique thought and expression. The second factor externalizes values and mores, thereby externalizing conscience. Social forces shape expectations. Behavior and one's talents and creativity are funneled into forms that follow and support the existing social milieu. "My mom says we should always be aware of what our lawn looks like because we want other people to think well of us when they drive by." Because conscience is derived from an external social context, so long as society holds ethical standards, people influenced by the second factor will behave ethically. However if a society, church, or government becomes corrupt, as in Nazi Germany, people strongly influenced by second factor will not dissent. Socialization without individual examination leads to a rote and robotic existence (the "robopath" described by Ludwig von Bertalanffy). Individual reactions are not unique, they are based upon social contexts ("I cry at funerals and laugh at weddings — everyone does"). According to Dąbrowski, people primarily motivated by second factor represent a significant majority of the general population.

Dąbrowski felt that our society was largely influenced by these lower two factors and could be characterized as operating at Level I. For example, our emphasis on corporate success ("a dog eat dog mentality") means that many CEOs operate on the basis of first factor — they will quickly sacrifice another to enhance their own advancement. As well, our educational, political, corporate, and media systems are self-promoting and discourage real examination or individual autonomy — the second factor. Alternatively, social justifications are often used: "of course I break the speed limit, everyone does." Or a soldier may explain that he or she was simply "following orders." Thus, this external value system absolves the individual of any individual responsibility.

Dąbrowski also described a group of people who display a different course: an individualized developmental pathway. These people break away from an automatic, rote, socialized view of life (which Dąbrowski called negative adjustment) and move into and through a series of personal disintegrations. Dąbrowski saw these disintegrations as a key element in the overall developmental process. Crises challenge our status quo and cause us to review our self, ideas, values, thoughts, ideals, etc. If development continues, one goes on to develop an individualized, conscious and critically evaluated hierarchical value structure (called positive adjustment). This hierarchy of values acts as a benchmark by which all things are now seen, and the higher values in our internal hierarchy come to direct our behavior (no longer based on external social mores). These higher, individual values characterize an eventual second integration reflecting individual autonomy and for Dąbrowski, mark the arrival of true human personality. At this level, each person develops his or her own vision of how life ought to be and lives it. This higher level is associated with strong individual approaches to problem solving and creativity. One's talents and creativity are applied in the service of these higher individual values and visions of how life could be - how the world ought to be. The person expresses his or her "new" autonomous personality energetically through action, art, social change and so on.

Development potential

Advanced development is often seen in people who exhibit strong developmental potential ("DP"). Developmental potential represents a constellation of genetic features, expressed and mediated through environmental interaction. Many factors are incorporated in developmental potential but three major aspects are highlighted: overexcitability (OE), specific abilities and talents, and a strong drive toward autonomous growth, a feature Dąbrowski called the "third factor."

Overexcitability

The most evident aspect of developmental potential is overexcitability (OE), a heightened physiological experience of stimuli resulting from increased neuronal sensitivities. The greater the OE, the more intense are the day-to-day experiences of life. Dąbrowski outlined five forms of OE: psychomotor, sensual, imaginal, intellectual and emotional. These overexcitabilities, especially the latter three, often cause a person to experience daily life more intensely and to feel the extremes of the joys and sorrows of life profoundly. Dąbrowski studied human exemplars and found that heightened overexcitability was a key part of their developmental and life experience. These people are steered and driven by their value "rudder", their sense of emotional OE. Combined with imaginal and intellectual OE, these people have a powerful perception of the world.^[1]

Although based in the nervous system, overexcitabilities come to be expressed psychologically through the development of structures that reflect the emerging autonomous self. The most important of these conceptualizations are dynamisms: biological or mental forces that control behavior and its development. Instincts, drives and intellectual processes combined with emotions are dynamisms.^[2] With advanced development, dynamisms increasingly reflect movement toward autonomy.

Abilities and talents

The second arm of developmental potential, specific abilities and talents, tends to serve the person's developmental level. As outlined, people at lower levels use talents to support egocentric goals or to climb the social and corporate ladders. At higher levels, specific talents and abilities become an important force as they are channeled by the person's value hierarchy into expressing and achieving the person's vision of his or her ideal personality and his or her view of how the world ought to be.

The third factor

The third aspect of developmental potential, which is simply referred to as 'the third factor', is a drive toward individual growth and autonomy. The third factor is critical as it applies one's talents and creativity toward autonomous expression, and second, it provides motivation to strive for more and to try to imagine and achieve goals currently beyond one's grasp. Dąbrowski was clear to differentiate third factor from free will. He felt that free will did not go far enough in capturing the motivating aspects that he attributed to third factor. For example, an individual can exercise free will and show little motivation to grow or change as an individual. Third factor specifically describes a motivation—a motivation to become one's self. This motivation is often so strong that in some situations we can observe that one needs to develop oneself and that in so doing, it places one at great peril. This feeling of "I've gotta be me" especially when it is "at any cost" and especially when it is expressed as a strong motivator for self-growth is beyond the usual conceptualization ascribed to free will.

A person whose DP is high enough *will generally* undergo disintegration, despite any external social or family efforts to prevent it. A person whose DP is low will *generally not* undergo disintegration (or positive personality growth) even in a conducive environment.

The notion that some people have an innate potential for development that is determined by a higher sensitivity or overexcitability (analogous to the first aspect of DP) and by a related tendency to develop individual differences and autonomy from the group (analogous to the third aspect of DP) was independently developed by Elaine Aron (see Highly sensitive person). (although it should be noted that Aron's approach is substantially different from Dąbrowski's.)

A mixed blessing?

Dąbrowski called OE "a tragic gift" to reflect that the road of the person with strong OE is not a smooth or easy one. Potentials to experience great highs are also potentials to experience great lows. Similarly, potentials to express great creativity hold the likelihood of experiencing a great deal of personal conflict and stress. This stress both drives development and is a result of developmental conflicts, both intrapsychic and social. Suicide is a significant risk in the acute phases of this stress. The isolation often experienced by these people heightens the risk of self-harm.

Dąbrowski advocated autopsychotherapy, educating the person about OEs and the disintegrative process to give him or her a context within which to understand intense feelings and needs. Dąbrowski suggested giving people support in their efforts to develop and find their own self-expression. Children and adults with high DP have to find and walk their own path, often at the expense of fitting in with their social peers and even with their families. At the core of autopsychotherapy is the awareness that no one can show anyone else the "right" path. Everyone has to find their own path for themselves. As Joseph Campbell described the knights on the Grail Quest: If a path exists in the forest, don't follow it, for though it took someone else to the Grail, it will not take you there, because it is not your path.

The levels

The first and fifth levels are characterized by psychological integration, harmony, and little inner conflict. There is little internal conflict at Level I because just about every behavior is justified — it is either good for the individual and is therefore "right," or the individual's society endorses it and it is therefore "right." In either case, with a high level of confidence the individual acts as he or she perceives anyone else would, and does what anyone is "supposed to do." At Level V there is no internal conflict because what a person does is always in accord with their own internal sense of values. Of course, there is often external conflict at both Levels I and V.

Levels II, III and IV describe various degrees and types of dis-integration and literal dis-ease.

Dąbrowski was very clear that the levels he presents "represent a heuristic device". In the process of development the structures of two or even three contiguous levels may exist side by side, although it must be understood that they exist in conflict. The conflict is resolved when one of the structures is eliminated, or at least comes under complete control of another structure.^[3]

Level I: Primary Integration

As outlined above, the first level is called primitive or primary integration. People at this level are often influenced primarily by either prominent first factor (heredity/impulse) and/or second factor (social environment) forces. The majority of people at Level I are integrated at the environmental or social level (Dąbrowski called them average people); however, many also exhibit shades of both impulse and socialization. Dąbrowski distinguished the two subgroups of Level I by degree: "the state of primary integration is a state contrary to mental health. A fairly high degree of primary integration is present in the average person; a very high degree of primary integration is present in the psychopath".^[4] Marked by selfishness and egocentrism (both reticent and explicit), those at level one development generally seek self-fulfillment above all, justifying their pursuits through a sort of "it's all about me" thinking; or, more simply put, they adhere strongly to the phrase "the end justifies the means", sometimes disregarding the severity of the "means". Many people who are considered "leaders" often fall into this category.

A vast majority of people either do not break down their primitive integration at all, or after a relatively short period of disintegration, usually experienced at the time of adolescence and early youth, end in a reintegration at the former level or in partial integration of some of the functions at slightly higher levels, without a transformation of the whole mental structure.^[5]

Level II: Unilevel Disintegration

The prominent feature of this level is an initial, brief and often intense crisis or series of crises. Crises are spontaneous and occur on only one level. These crises involve alternatives that may appear to be different but ultimately are on the same level.

Unilevel disintegration occurs during developmental crises such as puberty or menopause, in periods of difficulty in handling some stressful external event, or under psychological and psychopathological conditions such as nervousness and psychoneurosis. Unilevel disintegration consists of processes on a single structural and emotional level; there is a prevalence of automatic dynamisms with only slight self-consciousness and self-control.^[6]

Conflicts on the same level (horizontal) produce ambitemperies and ambivalences: the person is equally attracted by different but equivalent choices on the same level (ambitemperies) and is not able to decide what to do because he or she has no real preference between the choices (ambivalences). If developmental forces are strong enough, ultimately, the person is thrust into an existential crisis: one's social rationales no longer account for one's experiences and there are no alternative explanations. During this phase, existential despair is the predominant emotion. The resolution of this phase begins as individually chosen values begin to replace social mores that have been ingrained by rote and are integrated into a new hierarchy of personal values. These new values often conflict with the person's previous social values. Many of the status quo explanations for the "way things are," learned through education and from the social order, collapse under conscious, individual scrutiny. This causes more conflicts focused on the person's analysis of his or her own reactions to the world at large and of the behavior of self and others. Common behaviors and the ethics of the prevailing social order come to be seen as inadequate, wrong or hypocritical. Positive maladjustment prevails. For Dąbrowski, these crises represent a strong potential for development toward personal growth and mental health. Using a positive definition, mental health reflects more than social conformity: it involves a careful, personal examination of the world and of one's values, leading to the development of an individual personality.

Level II is a transitional period. Dąbrowski said you either fall back (reintegration on a lower level), move ahead or end negatively, in suicide or psychosis.^[7]

The transition from Level II to Level III involves a fundamental shift that requires a phenomenal amount of energy. This period is the crossroads of development: from here one must either progress or regress. The struggle between Dąbrowski's three factors reflects this transitional crisis: "Do I follow my instincts (first factor), my teachings (second factor) or my heart (third factor)?" The developmental answer is to transform one's lower instincts (automatic reactions like anger) into positive motivation, to resist rote and social answers, and to listen to one's inner sense of what one ought to do.

Level III: Spontaneous Multilevel Disintegration

Level III describes a new type of conflict: a vertical conflict between two alternatives that are not simply different, but that exist on different levels. One is genuinely higher and the other is lower in comparison. These vertical conflicts initially arise from involuntary perceptions of higher versus lower choices in life. You just look at something, maybe for the 1000th time (to use the words of G. K. Chesterton), and it strikes you — you see this one thing differently and once you do, it changes things. You can no longer "go back and see it the way you did before." Dąbrowski called this vertical dimension multilevelness. Multilevelness is a gradual realization of the "possibility of the higher" (a phrase Dąbrowski used frequently) and of the subsequent contrasts between the higher and the lower in life. These vertical comparisons often illustrate the lower, actual behavior of a person in contrast to higher, imagined ideals and alternative idealized choices. Dąbrowski believed that the authentic individual would choose the higher path as the clear and obvious one to follow (erasing the ambivalences and ambitemperies of unilevel conflicts). If the person's actual behavior subsequently falls short of the ideal, internal disharmony and a drive to review and reconstruct one's life often follow. Multilevelness thus represents a new and powerful type of conflict, a conflict that is developmental in Dąbrowski's approach.

These vertical conflicts are critical in leading to autonomy and advanced personality growth. If the person is to achieve higher levels, the shift to multilevelness must occur. If a person does not have the developmental potential to move into a multilevel view, then he or she will fall back from the crises of Level II to reintegrate at Level I. In the shift to multilevelness, the horizontal (unilevel), stimulus-response model of life is replaced by a vertical and hierarchical analysis. This vertical view becomes anchored by one's emerging individual value structure, and all events are seen in relation to personal ideals. These personal value ideals become the personality ideal: how the person wants to live his or her life. As events in life are seen in relation to this multilevel, vertical view, it becomes impossible to support positions that favor the lower course when higher goals can be identified (or imagined).

Level IV: Directed Multilevel Disintegration

In Level IV the person takes full control of his or her development. The involuntary spontaneous development of Level III is replaced by a deliberate, conscious and self-directed review of life from the multilevel perspective. This level marks the real emergence of the third factor, described by Dąbrowski as an autonomous factor "of conscious choice (valuation) by which one affirms or rejects certain qualities in oneself and in one's environment".^[8] The person consciously reviews his or her existing belief system and tries to replace lower, automatic views and reactions with carefully thought out, examined and chosen ideals. These new values will increasingly be reflected in the person's behavior. Behavior becomes less reactive, less automatic and more deliberate as behavioral choices fall under the influence of the person's higher, chosen ideals.

Social mores are reviewed and re-accepted by a conscious internalization when the individual feels it is appropriate. Likewise, when the person feels it is proper, a social value is reviewed and may be rejected to be replaced by a self perceived higher alternative value. One's social orientation comes to reflect a deep responsibility based on both intellectual and emotional factors. At the highest levels, "individuals of this kind feel responsible for the realization of justice and for the protection of others against harm and injustice. Their feelings of responsibility extend almost to everything".^[9] This perspective results from seeing life in relation to one's hierarchy of values (the multilevel view) and the subsequent appreciation of the potential of how life could be, and ought to be, lived. One's disagreements with the (lower level) world are expressed compassionately in doing what one can to help achieve the "ought."

Given their genuine (authentic) prosocial outlook, people achieving higher development also raise the level of their society. Prosocial here is not just support of the existing social order. If the social order is lower and you are adjusted to it, then you also reflect the lower (negative adjustment in Dąbrowski's terms, a Level I feature). Here, prosocial is a genuine cultivation of social interactions based on higher values. These positions often conflict with the status quo of a lower society (positive maladjustment). In other words, to be maladjusted to a low-level society is a positive feature.

Level V: Secondary Integration

The fifth level displays an integrated and harmonious character, but one vastly different from that at the first level. At this highest level, one's behavior is guided by conscious, carefully weighed decisions based on an individualized and chosen hierarchy of personal values. Behavior conforms to this inner standard of how life ought to be lived, and thus little inner conflict arises.

Level V is often marked by creative expression. Especially at Level V, problem solving and art represent the highest and noblest features of human life. Art captures the innermost emotional states and is based on a deep empathy and understanding of the subject. Often, human suffering and sacrifice are the subjects of these works. Truly visionary works, works that are unique and novel, are created by people expressing a vision unrestrained by convention. Advances in society, through politics, philosophy and religion, are therefore commonly associated with strong individual creativity or accomplishments.

Applications of the theory of positive disintegration

Therapy

The theory of positive disintegration has an extremely broad scope and has implications for many areas. One central application applies to psychological and psychiatric diagnosis and treatment. Dąbrowski advocated a comprehensive, multidimensional diagnosis of the person's situation, including symptoms and developmental potentials.

Symptoms and developmental potentials

If the disintegration appears to fit into a developmental context, then the person is educated in the theory and encouraged to take a developmental view of his or her situation and experiences. Rather than being eliminated, symptoms are reframed to yield insight and understanding into life and the person's unique situation.

The importance of narratives

Dąbrowski illustrated his theory through autobiographies of and biographies about those who have experienced positive disintegration. The gifted child, the suicidal teen or the troubled artist is often experiencing the features of TPD, and if they accept and understand the meaning of their intense feelings and crises, they can move ahead, not fall apart. The completion of an extensive autobiography to help the individual gain perspective on his or her past and present is an important component in the autopsychotherapy process. In this process, the therapist plays a very small role and acts more as an initial stimulus than an ongoing therapist. Dąbrowski asked clients to read his books and to see how his ideas may relate to their lives.

Autopsychotherapy

For Dąbrowski, the goal of therapy is to eliminate the therapist by providing a context within which a person can understand and help oneself, an approach to therapy that he called autopsychotherapy. The client is encouraged to embark on a journey of self-discovery with an emphasis on looking for the contrast between what is higher versus what is lower within his or her personality and value structure. The person is encouraged to further explore his or her value structure especially as it relates to the rationale and justification of positions. Discrepancies between values and behavior are highlighted. The approach is called autopsychotherapy to emphasize the important role that the individual must play in his or her own therapy process and in the larger process of personality development. The individual must come to see that he or she is in charge of determining or creating his or her own unique personality ideal and value structure. This includes a critical review of social mores and values that have been learned.

Dąbrowski was very concerned about what he called one-sided development, in which people display significant advanced development in only one aspect of life, usually intellectual. He believed that people should ignore their strengths and focus on their weaknesses, thus balancing development.

Overexcitability

Dąbrowski also encouraged people to see their reactions (overexcitabilities) and their phenomenological view of the world in the context of their developmental potential. The experience of, and reaction to, crises are a very important aspect of this approach and people are encouraged to experience personal crises with a positive and developmental view.

Dąbrowski reminds clients that without internal disease there is little stimulus for change or growth. Rather than trying to rapidly ameliorate symptoms, this approach encourages individuals to fully experience their feelings and to try to maintain a positive and developmental orientation to what they may perceive as strong depression or anxiety. Of course, this is a unique approach in today's world of seeking immediate and total relief of any unpleasant psychological experience (although it can be compared to Aron's to some extent).

Education

Another primary focus is on education, in particular, over the past 25 years, on the experience of creative and gifted students. Dąbrowski hypothesized that these students will disproportionately show strong overexcitability and therefore will be prone to the disintegrative process.

Dąbrowski and the gifted individual

In an appendix to Dąbrowski (1967), results of investigations done in 1962 with Polish youth are reported. Specifically, "a group of gifted children and young people aged 8 to 23" were examined (p. 251). Of the 80 youth studied, 30 were "intellectually gifted" and 50 were from "drama, ballet, and plastic art schools" (p. 251). Dąbrowski found that every one of the children displayed overexcitability, "which constituted the foundation for the emergence of neurotic and psychoneurotic sets. Moreover it turned out that these children also showed sets of nervousness, neurosis, and psychoneurosis of various kinds and intensities, from light vegetative symptoms, or anxiety symptoms, to distinctly and highly intensive psychasthenic or hysterical sets" (p. 253). Dąbrowski asked why these children should display such "states of nervousness or psychoneurosis" and suggested that it was due to the presence of OE (p. 255). "Probably the cause is more than average sensitivity which not only permits one to achieve outstanding results in learning and work, but at the same time increases the number of points sensitive to all experiences that may accelerate anomalous reactions revealing themselves in psychoneurotic sets" (p. 255).

The association between OE and giftedness appears to be borne out in the research (Lysy and Piechowski 1983; Piechowski 1986; Piechowski and Miller 1995). It appears that at the least OE is a marker of potential for giftedness/creativity. Dąbrowski's basic message is that the gifted will disproportionately display this process of positive disintegration and personality growth.

Key ideas

The theory is based on numerous key ideas:

- That our lower animal instincts (first factor) must be inhibited and transformed into "higher" forces for us to be Human (this ability to transform our instincts is what separates us from animals).
 - That the common initial personality integration, based upon socialization (second factor), does not reflect true personality.
 - At the initial level of integration, there is little internal conflict as when one "goes along with the group," there is little sense of individual wrongdoing. External conflicts often relate to the blockage of social goals – career frustrations for example. The social mores and values prevail with little question or conscious examination.
 - True personality must be based upon a system of values that are consciously and volitionally chosen by the person to reflect their own individual sense of "how life ought to be" and their "personality ideal" — the ideal person they feel they "ought to be."
 - The lower animal instincts and the forces of peer groups and socialization are inferior to the autonomous self (personality) constructed by the conscious person.
 - To break down the initial integration, crises and disintegrations are needed, usually provided by life experience.
 - These disintegrations are positive if the person can achieve positive and developmental solutions to the situation.
 - "Unilevel crises" are not developmental as the person can only choose between equal alternatives (go left or go right?).
 - A new type of perception involves "multilevelness," a vertical view of life that compares lower versus higher alternatives and now allows the individual to choose a higher resolution to a crisis over other available, but lower, alternatives — the developmental solution.
 - "Positive disintegration" is a vital developmental process.
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- Dąbrowski developed the idea of "developmental potential" to describe the forces needed to achieve autonomous personality development.
- Developmental potential includes several factors including innate abilities and talents, "overexcitability" and the "third factor."
- Overexcitability is a measure of an individual's level of nervous response. Dąbrowski found that the exemplars he studied all displayed an overly sensitive nervous system, also making them prone to angst, depression and anxiety - psychoneuroses in Dąbrowski's terms, a very positive and developmental feature.
- The third factor is a measure of an individual's drive toward autonomy.
- Dąbrowski's approach is very interesting philosophically as it is Platonic, reflecting the bias of Plato toward essence — an individual's essence is a critical determinant of his or her developmental course in life. However, Dąbrowski also added a major existential aspect as well, what one depends upon the anxieties felt and on how one resolves the day to day challenges one faces. Essence must be realized through an existential and experiential process of development. The characterization advanced by Kierkegaard of "Knights of faith" may be compared to Dąbrowski's autonomous individual.
- Reviewed the role of logic and reasoning in development and concludes that intellect alone does not fully help us know what to do in life. Incorporates Jean Piaget's views of development into a broader scheme guided by emotion. Emotion (how one feels about something) is the more accurate guide to life's major decisions.
- When multilevel and autonomous development is achieved, a secondary integration is seen reflecting the mature personality state. The individual has no inner conflict; they are in internal harmony as their actions reflect their deeply felt hierarchy of values.
- Rejected Maslow's description of self-actualization (Dąbrowski was a personal friend and correspondent of Maslow's). Actualization of an undifferentiated human self is not a developmental outcome in Dąbrowski's terms. Dąbrowski applied a multilevel (vertical) approach to self and saw the need to become aware of and to inhibit and reject the lower instinctual aspects of the intrinsic human self (aspects that Maslow would have us "embrace without guilt") and to actively choose and assemble higher elements into a new unique self - this process is what differentiates Man from the Animals. Dąbrowski would have us differentiate the initial self into higher and lower aspects, as we define them, and to reject the lower and actualize the higher in creating our unique personality.

Secondary integration versus self-actualization

People have often equated Maslow's concept of self-actualization with Dąbrowski's level of secondary integration. There are some major differences between these two ideas. Fundamentally, Maslow described self-actualization as a process where the self is accepted "as is", so both higher and lower aspects of the self are actualized. Dąbrowski introduces the notion that although the lower aspects may initially be intrinsic to the self, as human beings we are able to become aware of their lower nature. We are able to develop self-awareness into how we feel about these low levels—if we feel badly about behaving in these lower ways, then we are able to cognitively and volitionally decide to inhibit and eliminate these behaviors. In this way, the higher aspects of the self are actualized while the lower aspects are inhibited and, for Dąbrowski, this is what is unique about humans and sets us apart from animals—animals are not able to differentiate their lower instincts and therefore can not inhibit their animalistic impulses. Dąbrowski has gone beyond Maslow's idea of self-actualization and it is not appropriate to equate the two authors on this point.

Obstacles to the theory

Both Dąbrowski and his work have faced many obstacles. Personally, he was severely affected by both World Wars. His work always went against the grain. One can imagine a humanistic theory promoting personal growth in the political atmosphere of Poland in the 1950s and 1960s. Another problem has been language. Dąbrowski wrote in Polish and translated his works into French and Spanish. English was the last language he learned and likely the most difficult in terms of capturing the subtleties of his ideas. In spite of these problems, Dąbrowski persevered with his studies of human development, developed his theory and practiced psychiatry all his life.

Dąbrowski died in 1980 and his students went on to explore careers of their own. Many of these students continue to study and speak on the theory, most advancing a deeply personal understanding of what the theory means to them. For many, the theory has become a lifelong friend.

Since 1980, there has been a small but consistent demand for Dąbrowski's works. This demand has largely evolved in the United States where Michael Piechowski applied his vision of the theory to gifted education. Many in education and in gifted education have looked to Dąbrowski's theory to help provide a context for their students. Although a small part of the overall theory, this aspect has generated a number of Master's and Ph.D. theses and introduced the theory to a large audience, an audience eager to learn more about Dąbrowski and his theory.

The reader interested in Dąbrowski has faced a serious scarcity of resources, especially of Dąbrowski's English works. His books are long out of print and rare, and his papers are held by a few people but not circulated. There are also many excellent Polish works by Dąbrowski (about 20 books) on the theory, on psychotherapy, on education and on philosophy that await translation into English. Several efforts are underway to remedy this scarcity, including the Dąbrowski website (see below), a current initiative to reprint Dąbrowski's English books (they are currently available as pdf files on a CD) and ongoing conferences and workshops.

Notes

- [1] Dąbrowski 1972, p. 6.
- [2] Dąbrowski 1972, p. 294.
- [3] Dąbrowski 1996, p. 17.
- [4] Dąbrowski 1964, p. 121.
- [5] Dąbrowski, Kawczak & Piechowski 1970, p. 4.
- [6] Dąbrowski 1964, p. 6.
- [7] Dąbrowski 1964, p. 7.
- [8] Dąbrowski 1972, p. 306.
- [9] Dąbrowski, Kawczak & Sochanska 1973, p. 97.

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External links

- The Theory of Positive Disintegration by Kazimierz Dąbrowski (<http://positivedisintegration.com/>)
 - The Polish website dedicated to Kazimierz Dąbrowski and his Theory of Positive Disintegration (<http://www.dezintegracja.pl>)
 - A comparison between the Zen Buddhist Ten Oxherding Pictures and the Theory of Positive Disintegration (<http://positivedisintegration.com/Nixon.pdf>)
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