

The Basic Concepts of Dabrowski's Theory of Positive Disintegration.

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Abstract

Dabrowski presents a theory of personality development based on an interplay of potentials, disintegrations of lower functions and reintegrations of higher features marked by a multilevel, hierarchical view of life. Personality development is largely the result of the impact of forms of developmental potential (DP), notably, overexcitability (OE). This overexcitability may lead to a long course of developmental crises (positive disintegrations) and challenges that culminate in the emergence of an autonomous, self crafted personality. Dabrowski's theory is presented in six major works (Dabrowski 1964, 1967, 1970, 1972, 1973, 1996). The basic principles of the Theory are outlined to give the reader an introduction to Dabrowski's ideas.

The Basic Concepts of Dabrowski's Theory of Positive Disintegration.

Dabrowski presents a theory of personality development based on his observation that most people live their lives guided by their biological impulses (generally self-interest) and/or by uncritical adherence to social convention. He called these features the first and second factors. Dabrowski also described a group of people who display an individualized developmental pathway. These people break away from a rote, unreflective view of life (what Dabrowski described as "negative adjustment") to develop an individualized, critically evaluated value structure ("positive adjustment"). This hierarchy of values comes to act as a benchmark by which all things are seen. Advanced development is possible because these people possess higher than average "developmental potentials." Developmental potential is a constellation of genetic features, expressed through environmental interaction that consists of three major aspects: overexcitability (OE), specific abilities and talents, and a strong drive toward autonomous growth, a feature that Dabrowski called the third factor.

The most apparent and perhaps most fundamental aspect of developmental potential is overexcitability, a heightened physiological experience of sensory stimuli resulting from increased neuronal sensitivities. The greater the OE, the more intense the neurological, sensory experience of life, or in other words, the more sensitive the individual is to the experience of life. Dabrowski presented five forms of OE: psychomotor, sensual, imaginal, intellectual and emotional. These

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intensely and to feel the extremes of the joys and sorrows of life profoundly (thus Dabrowski's reference to OE as "the tragic gift").

Although based in the nervous system, overexcitabilities are played out on a psychological stage through the development of structures that reflect the emerging self. The most important of these conceptualizations are dynamisms, biological or mental forces that control behaviour and its development. "Instincts, drives, and intellectual processes combined with emotions are dynamisms" (Dabrowski, 1972, p. 294). With development, dynamisms increasingly reflect movement toward autonomy.

Two levels, the first and the fifth, are characterized by psychological integration highlighted by harmony and low levels of inner conflict. The first level is called primitive or primary integration and consists of an integration at the environmental or social level. This group includes people who show either prominent First Factor ("heredity") and/or Second Factor ("social environment"). Many people show shades of both factors. Level I includes both groups: those who are unsocialized (asocial and/or antisocial) plus the "average," normally socialized person (Dabrowski distinguished the two subgroups 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." (Dabrowski, 1964, p. 121). Dabrowski used the terms psychopath and psychopathy in describing level I (see Dabrowski, 1964, pp. 73-75). I think this has been confusing as our current understanding of these terms is different and perhaps more pejorative than reflected in Dabrowski's usage. "Psychopath" was commonly used to refer to people who had constitutional (physical or genetic) deficits that impeded their development. I suggest that Dabrowski's description of level I as psychopathic reflects this context: a group with a low quantity of developmental potential (a constellation of genetic features) which thus impedes their developmental course. Dabrowski believed that most of society's members live on this level (also see Dabrowski, 1964, pp. 4-10 and pp. 121-122).

Levels II, III and IV describe various levels and forms of disintegration. The character of level II is reflected in its name: Unilevel Disintegration. The prominent features of this level are initial, brief, and often intense crises. Crises are spontaneous and only occur on one level (and often involve only one dimension). "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" (Dabrowski, 1964, p. 6). Conflicts on the same level (horizontal conflicts) produce ambitemperies and ambivalences: the person is pulled between different but equivalent choices. Ultimately, the individual is literally thrust into a void: their social rationales fail to account for their experiences and no alternate explanations are satisfactory. During this phase, existential despair is the predominant emotion. The developmental resolution of this phase begins as emergent individual values of the "new" personality increasingly encounter and

conflict with the person's previous socialization. The "status quo" explanations for the "way things are," transmitted through education and by the social order collapse under conscious scrutiny. A series of conflicts commonly results as the individual increasingly questions the causes of their reactions within the world at large. The actions of others and the ethics of the prevailing social order become seen as inadequate, wrong or hypocritical. "Positive maladjustment" prevails. For Dabrowski, these crises represent the potential for personal growth as 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 and unique personality. In Dabrowski's theory, personality only emerges when individual values ("what ought to be") find their voice and replace the "what is" of life. Personality is a "self aware, self chosen, self affirmed, and self determined unity of essential individual psychic qualities" (Dabrowski, 1972, p. 301). Mental health is represented by an individual who has carefully and thoughtfully chosen his or her values and ideals in terms of the kind of person he or she ought to try to be. These individual values become hierarchical -- our highest values are our goals, often existing in conflict with lower values that characterize our earlier function and our prevailing social order.

Level II is a transitional period. Dabrowski used to say that you must either fall back, move ahead or end negatively (suicide / psychoses). "Prolongation of unilevel disintegration often leads to reintegration on a lower level, to suicidal tendencies, or to psychosis" (Dabrowski, 1964, p. 7).

The transition from level II to level III is a fundamental shift that requires a phenomenal amount of energy. This period is the critical juncture in development as from here one must either progress or regress. This transition is an awkward and complicated idea, for one thing, Dabrowski saw it as a process that could either occur all at once or that could occur incrementally. First and Second Factors are both targets of the conflict in these crises: "Do I follow my instincts (First Factor), my teachings (Second Factor) or my heart (Third Factor)?" The developmental answer is to listen to your heart, transform your instincts into positive features (e.g. motivation) and to resist rote, social answers. This whole developmental process, occurring in the context of disintegration -- a very chaotic period, sweeps you along (it feels a little like a car accident) and as it does, it changes you and your view of life.

Level III describes the vertical conflicts caused by an involuntary perception of the higher versus lower choices in life (because it is involuntary Dabrowski called it *spontaneous* multilevel disintegration). Dabrowski called this vertical dimension multilevelness. With multilevelness comes a new and powerful type of conflict. Multilevelness is a gradual realization of the "possibility of the higher" (a phrase Dabrowski used frequently) and of the subsequent contrasts between the higher and the lower aspects of life. These vertical comparisons often illustrate the lower, actual behaviour of a person in contrast to higher, imagined ideals and alternative choices. When a person perceives the higher choice, he or she feels that this is obviously the path one ought to follow. When the person's actual behaviour falls short of the ideal, disharmony and a drive to review and reconstruct one's life often follow.

If the person is to achieve Dabrowski's higher levels, this shift to multilevelness must occur. If a person does not have the developmental potential to move into a multilevel view, then they would 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 experience of life. This vertical view influences a person's developing value structure and all events come to be seen in relation to personal ideals. These personal value ideals become a coherent entity -- the personality ideal: an inner vision of how the person wants to live their life and the kind of person one wants to become. As events in life are seen in relation to this multilevel, vertical view, it becomes impossible to support positions that favour the lower course when higher goals can be identified (or imagined).

In level IV the individual takes control of their 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 emergence of "the third factor," described by Dabrowski as an autonomous factor "of conscious choice (valuation) by which one affirms or rejects certain qualities in oneself and in one's environment" (Dabrowski, 1972, p. 306). The person consciously reviews their existing belief system and tries to replace their lower, automatic views and reactions with carefully thought out, examined and chosen ideals. These "new" values will increasingly be reflected in the person's behaviour. Behaviour becomes less reactive, less automatic, and more deliberate and volitional as behavioural choices increasingly fall under the influence of the person's higher, chosen ideals.

All of these stages of disintegration represent extreme conflict. Traditional therapeutic approaches have been to palliate conflict in an attempt to quickly return the person to the state of "normal" functioning. Dabrowski advanced a more sophisticated approach based on a comprehensive diagnosis. Dabrowski said that half of the therapy process involved a complete diagnosis of a person's developmental potentials, not simply a review of their symptoms. When severe symptoms are seen in people with significant potential, the approach is to encourage the person to "see the crisis through" and to reframe the psychoneurosis in positive terms - hence Dabrowski's 1972 book title "Psychoneurosis is Not an Illness." In cases where developmental potential is low, Dabrowski advocated a palliative approach to crises and a return to the former stability. In people with strong DP, there is transformative potential for suffering - dis-ease causes us to search for "higher level" solutions. In this context, suffering has a positive role in human psychology. It is through our own suffering that we develop empathy for others and understand our own interdependence on others and our mortality. This causes a review of our basic values and, as mentioned above, ideally leads to the development of autonomous values. The second aspect of therapy for those with strong DP is to encourage the person to move into Level IV and to take active control over their psychoneurosis and their development. Dabrowski called this process autopsychotherapy. The goal was to allow the person to develop autonomy over their development - not to become dependent on an external therapist - an approach that was unpopular in an atmosphere that encouraged (encourages) personal

therapists for everyone.

A person's social orientation comes to reflect a deep responsibility based on both intellectual and emotional factors. This attitude reflects one's growth, and 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" (Dabrowski, 1973, p. 97). 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. Your disagreements with the (lower level) world are expressed compassionately in doing what you can to help. Others are seen with understanding and empathy.

Given their genuine (authentic) pro social outlook, those individuals achieving higher development would also raise the level of their society. "Pro social" 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 Dabrowski's terms, a level I feature). Here, pro social 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.

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

The Theory of Positive Disintegration has an extremely broad scope and has implications for many areas. One central application is the way that psychology and psychiatry frame crises and disintegration. As mentioned above, Dabrowski advocated a very careful, multilevel and broad diagnosis of the person's situation, including their developmental potential and level of overexcitability. 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 their situation and experiences. Rather than trying to eliminate symptoms, they are reframed to yield insight and understanding into life and the person's unique situation. Dabrowski illustrated his theory in the autobiographies of, and biographies about, those who have experienced positive disintegration. He also encouraged autobiography as an important step in the process of autopsychotherapy. For Dabrowski, the goal of therapy was to provide a context for the individual to understand and help themselves.

A second primary focus is on education, and in particular, on the experience of creative or gifted students. Dabrowski hypothesized that these students will disproportionately show strong overexcitability and therefore will be prone to the disintegrative process.

Dabrowski's theory describes a way of looking at life, outlining the *experience* of life through the energies of overexcitability and multilevelness. The theory describes various consequences of this

experience, positive disintegration and personality growth among them. In this sense, Dabrowski is often discovered and understood by those who are in the midst of the developmental process. The concepts of multilevelness and overexcitability are often not easy to appreciate by those who do not experience them first hand. The theory is best understood through being lived and through personal introspection of one's experiences and feelings as one goes through the steps of advanced development.

In summary, Dabrowski presents a theory of personality development describing how a small number of individuals will go through a process involving a series of disintegrations and subsequent reintegrations leading to the development of an autonomous personality. This process, which is more detailed than suggested here, involves a fundamental tearing apart of the existing reality function to allow for construction of a reality function and "new coordinating elements" on a new (higher) level (see Dabrowski, 1972, p. 224). In this way, a person can apply conscious self development to transcend their genotype, overcome biological instinct and rote socialization, and to consciously become the authentic human being they choose to be.

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