

On primary integration, psychopathy and average person

By Elizabeth Mika September 2002

The concept of integration in psychology has predominantly positive connotations, usually describing a state conducive to coherent, predictable and effective functioning of an individual in his world. Disintegration, on the other hand, is typically considered a negative and undesirable aspect of human existence, characterized by lack of coherence, chaos and general ineffectiveness. In his Theory of Positive Disintegration, Kazimierz Dabrowski's aim was to show that both concepts as descriptions of psychological states can have either positive or negative meaning, depending on their role in individual development.

The term 'primary integration' denotes a type of a character structure and/or state of being not amenable to growth through positive disintegration. It is a concept derived from and of particular importance to developmental psychopathology. As Dabrowski writes, "The concepts of integration and disintegration are typical 'growing' concepts which develop in proportion to the development of psychology and psychopathology of higher mental functions." (Dabrowski et al., 1973, p. 45). Dabrowski designed the first level of development, level 1, the level of primary integration.

In TPD, primary integration, also called 'negative integration,' is a state contrary to development, which, in its extreme, characterizes severe forms of emotional and mental retardation. "The concept of negative integration is indispensable to the understanding of psychopathy, some global forms of mental retardation and rigid mental structures which do not present development or only weak or partial forms of development." (ibid., p.40)

In cases of psychopathy (emotional retardation), we find a distinct unification of psychological functions into a coherent character structure, where intelligence is subsumed under control of primitive egocentric drives and instincts such as instinct of self-preservation or primitive sexual instinct. “Negative integration is a primitive, inflexible structure of functions, which shows a low level of narrow rigid organization of primitive, impulsive, nondevelopmental forces, with intelligence subordinated to those forces.” (Dabrowski et al. 1973, p. 40)

From the point of view of emotional development, psychopathy is characterized chiefly by the inability to experience empathy and guilt, two emotions crucial for development of conscience and growth through positive disintegration. Empathy, and related to it an ability to experience feelings of guilt, act as disintegrative factors toward primitive, instinctively based behaviors, and thus introduce elements of inner conflict and inhibition, both absent in psychopathic individuals.

For a long time, both empathy and guilt were considered distinctly human emotions, not found in the animal world. Modern research in behavioral biology disputes the human uniqueness of both, showing that an ability to experience empathy and guilt is characteristic for animals as well (Preston, S., de Waal, F., 2002; O’Connor, L., personal communication). Experimental evidence, gathered through decades-long research, reveals that in many species empathy toward another animal in distress overrides even instinct of self-preservation, leading to actions directed at relieving another’s suffering even if such actions cost the “rescuer’s” life. Moreover, many animal species can be taught to respond with empathy to distress of another (Preston and de Waal, *ibid.*, 2002). Available data strongly support the contention that empathy is “a phylogenetically continuous

phenomenon” existing in different degrees in nonhuman species (Preston, de Waal, p. 284), a view expressed already by Darwin in his 1871 “The Descent of Man.”

But perhaps even more thought-provoking than examples of empathy in animals are instances of failure of empathy in people. As psychological research shows, and daily experiences prove over and over again, empathy in human beings, although apparently hard-wired into our nature by selective pressures of the evolutionary history, is a relatively fragile trait, easily extinguished by such powerful motivators as fear, desire to dominate and control, and a need to submit and to belong. In an average person, empathy is limited to his closest circle of relatives and friends, and rarely stretches beyond the confines of his private world. This explains the ease with which many can dismiss the needs of “the other” who does not belong to their own group, and engage in most violent acts toward him without feeling much guilt. The examples of war atrocities, everyday violence, and indifference to pain and suffering of others, provide enough evidence of the fragility of human empathy. A somewhat different, though related phenomenon is the failure of empathy toward one’s closest relatives, despite one’s professed and enacted love for humanity at large – a trait frequently found in some social reformers, spiritual leaders and other eminent individuals with narcissistic character structures.

It is important then that the ability to experience empathy, apparently universal in group-living species, be distinguished from empathy as a dynamism of conscious personality development postulated by Dabrowski. Even though the capacity for empathy (and guilt, in some primates) is based on the same psychobiological factors common in species which develop complex systems of social interactions, only in a relatively small group of people it is coupled with cognitive complexity that gives it the strength and conscious, autonomous dimensions necessary to make it a major guiding factor in personality growth.

Degrees of primary integration

Although primary integration describes level 1 and thus encompasses the majority of individuals in the present human society, people existing in primary (negative) integration do not form a homogenous group. According to Dabrowski, there are degrees of primary integration, just like there are degrees of disintegration. An overwhelming majority of people possess some developmental potential, which means that they have some capability for positive disintegration. Dabrowski also notes that a great majority of people also exhibit some psychopathic traits; but only constitutional psychopaths and persons with global mental retardation are so highly integrated that they are incapable of any degree of development.

Based on the degree of integration and disintegration, Dabrowski described the following groups of people inhabiting level 1:

1. Psychopath and psychopath-like individual.
2. Borderline between average person and psychopath.
3. Average person.
4. Borderline between average person and psychoneurotic (Dabrowski, 1986).

The above groups differ in the degree of integration: from the high degree in psychopaths and psychopath-like persons to less rigid integration in average persons, and still less integrated character structure in those who possess some symptoms of nervousness, which predispose them to positive disintegration (even if this disintegration is limited in its scope and transformational strength, never reaching beyond unilevelness).

The table below illustrates an approximate distribution of different developmental categories along the integration/disintegration continuum. (Please note that as a rough approximation, the table does not provide exact proportions of the listed categories as they occur on any given level of development; nor it exhausts many different developmental and psychopathological combinations observed in people. Development through positive disintegration, although conceptually divided into discreet levels, in reality occurs along the integration/disintegration continuum, with varying degrees of both present in most people who possess any measure of developmental potential.)

Secondary Integration	Level 5	Personality exemplars	
	Level 4	Developing personalities	
ML disintegration	Level 3	Psychoneurotics	
	Level 2	Neurotics, mentally ill	
		Borderline of average person and (psycho)neurotic	}
Disintegration		Average person	} Statistical norm
		Borderline of psychopath and average person	}
Primary Integration	Level 1	Psychopaths	

Dabrowski maintained that the greater number of individuals on the borderline of the average person and neurotics/ psychoneurotics, the healthier the society and the better the chances that its most creative and developmentally advanced members will be recognized and appreciated for the universal human values they embody in their lives.

The more numerous so-called ‘normal’ individuals bordering psychopathy, the greater possibilities of serious social maladies, since a society structured around low level values,

represented most vividly in actions of prominent psychopaths, will create and foster “suffering, mass terror, violent oppression, genocide and the decay of civilization.” (Dabrowski et al. 1973, p.40)

Average person and psychopath

The distinction between these two categories, although subtle in Dabrowski’s thought, is nevertheless important. As mentioned above, psychopaths are characterized by a strong degree of primary integration, defined here as the propensity to act on low level instincts, without possibilities of experiencing disintegrative influences of such emotions as empathy and guilt. Psychopathy is an example of either none or extremely weak developmental potential; or of negative developmental potential, if the primarily integrated character structure includes a-developmental components of overexcitabilities, namely psychomotor and sensual OE which intensify impulsive and sensation-seeking behaviors.

An average person, in Dabrowski’s understanding, possesses some, albeit limited, developmental potential. Thus a character structure of an average person is amenable to certain disintegrative experiences, which may lead to the rise of unilevel developmental dynamisms. But experiences of disintegration in average people will not reach the breadth and depth necessary for the developmental leap toward multilevelness, even though they may lead to a certain sensitization to their inner and external environment, and occasionally awaken creative strivings. Neither their creativity, nor sensitivity, however, will assume multilevel and multidimensional proportions easily observable in psychoneurotics driven by the instinct of self-perfection. Despite often strong suffering and inner chaos associated with unilevel disintegrative experiences in some average people, their limited developmental potential places constraints on their personal growth. And so strivings toward transcending one’s psychological type and the biological life

cycle, based on conscious efforts at autopsychotherapy and self-education, are generally absent in an average person. (It is important to note that the term “average person” is a concept designed to reflect statistical norm, and just like developmental levels, does not have a tangible representation in reality. Any ‘average person’ we pick from a crowd of so-called ‘average people’ carries with him unique, unrepeatable characteristics tied closely to his unique, unrepeatable life history, irreducible to conceptual shorthand.)

Even though both an average person and a psychopath inhabit level 1, primary integration, they function differently most of the time. While a psychopath’s actions are expressive of negative maladjustment (disregard for social norms and conventions in pursuit of one’s own egocentric goals), an average person represents negative adjustment (a faithful, often unreflective adherence to social mores). The difference between the two, though disappearing in times of social upheaval and disorder, is the difference between evil and (often harmless, sometimes not) complacency with the societal and personal status quo. And although an average person is closer in his developmental trajectory to a psychopath than to a psychoneurotic, abolishing all distinctions between them (i.e. between psychopath and average person) is unwarranted in light of TPD.

Occasionally, we can hear that Dabrowski used a unique definition of psychopathy in his writings, one that would justify putting a psychopath and an average person in the same category. This is not so. Dabrowski’s views on psychopathy closely reflect contemporary knowledge about this condition, making them very relevant in today’s clinical practice.

Psychopathy is historically the oldest personality disorder described in psychiatric literature. Its validity has been supported by both clinical and research data. Although no longer officially included in the current classification of mental disorders, it still serves an important function and many advocate for its return to the official diagnostic nomenclature

as the “clinical construct whose time has come” (Hare, 1996). From Pinel’s “insanity without delirium;” through all-inclusive “moral insanity” proposed by J.C. Prichard, a category which encompassed a diverse range of mental disorders, most of which did not have much to do with today’s understanding of the word; through Lombroso’s examples of “born delinquents,” who were “emotionally hyperactive, temperamentally irascible, impetuous in action, and deficient in altruistic feelings” (Millon, 1998, p.7); the clinical picture of psychopathy evolved in the last two centuries toward contemporary definitions, rooted in clinical descriptions by Cleckley (1976) and Hare (1993). A documented progression of this conceptual evolution is the subject of “Historical Conceptions of Psychopathy in the United States and Europe” by T. Millon, E. Simonsen and M. Birket-Smith (in Millon, T. et al, 1998).

Dabrowski was clearly aware of the changes that psychopathy as a diagnostic entity had undergone in the psychiatric terminology (as well as of distinctions between psychopathy and sociopathy, which he considered largely irrelevant) and his understanding reflects contemporary and commonly accepted clinical definitions of the term.

The unique contribution of Dabrowski’s approach to psychopathy was to stress its adevelopmental aspect, in line with his reasoning on the importance of disintegration in personality growth. A psychopath, due to the high integration of his character structure, which is devoid of capability to experience empathy and guilt, cannot undergo positive disintegration and engage in development, understood as a progression from automatic, instinctual egocentrism to conscious alterocentrism. Because of that, Dabrowski called psychopathy “the greatest obstacle in development of personality and social groups” (Dabrowski, 1986).

Primary integration and children

In many of his works, Dabrowski describes human infancy as a period of primary integration.

“The first year of life of a child is a period when its psychophysical organism is an indivisible whole. An infant's activities have a character of simple reactions to stimuli. Based on these simple reactions are created, thanks to environmental influences, behavioral habits. If the reaction-based activities are appropriate, this frees the child's closest environment and society from many future problems.” (Dabrowski, 1964, p.14)”

“The period of infancy is a distinctly integrated one since all the activities of an infant are directed to the goal of satisfying the basic necessities.” (Dabrowski, 1964, p.97)

However, in his later works, Dabrowski adopts a more nuanced position, stating,

"Of course, one could say that the period of infancy is one of primary integration. However, we cannot at that time identify the developmental factors (...). By the time a child begins to speak in sentences we can attempt to discern developmental factors and establish whether the developmental trend is integrative or disintegrative." (Dabrowski, 1996, p.23)

Because childhood and adolescence are periods when basic psychological structures are just developing, Dabrowski notes that talking about disintegration during these years is unwarranted unless we observe distinct symptoms of quantitative or qualitative changes in a child's development, significantly exceeding developmental patterns typical for childhood of the human species. Such changes include multiple types and forms of OE,

excessive sensitivity, and neurotic and even psychotic symptoms, associated with accelerated or uneven growth of different psychological functions.

Dabrowski discusses forms and types of disintegration observed in childhood in several works, most notably in his “Społeczno-wychowawcza psychiatria dziecięca” (Socio-educational child psychiatry).

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