

Gifted Minds in Search of a Theory

For some time now, experts in the field of giftedness have been searching for and creating theoretical models of development, which could be applied to the gifted population.

Unfortunately, such models often suffer from artificially imposed exclusivity.

As Ellen Winner writes,

“Psychology should have theories that account for the development of the atypical as well as the typical. We should not have entirely separate theories to explain learning and development in ordinary, retarded, autistic, learning-disabled and gifted children. Too often we have researchers devoted to one of these populations, with the result that we have separate explanatory accounts of each population.

“Ultimately, psychological theory must account for all of the various ways in which the mind and brain develop. We need universal theories of development, but these theories must be able to incorporate special populations, whether these are special because of pathology, giftedness, or both.” (Winner, 1996, p. 313)

Kazimierz Dabrowski's Theory of Positive Disintegration (TPD) shows a great promise as such a universal theory of development proposed above (Dabrowski, 1970).

TPD is the first theory in psychology that postulates levels of personality development and methods of measuring them; it also describes and explains mechanisms of emotional development.

The theory, formulated almost a half a century ago, focuses on positive aspects of mental health and the essential role of positive values in guiding human development, and as such it can be considered a precursor of positive psychology.

What is unique about the TPD approach, however, is that, through combining both biological and humanistic perspectives, it articulates a positive view of many forms of so-called psychopathology and human suffering in general – a perspective that is conspicuously missing from the positive psychology's exclusive focus on the good, virtuous and happy (Chang & Sanna, 2003).

While the 1990's were designated as the “Decade of the Brain,” it appears that the first decade of the 21st century has been dominated by the focus on emotions and their influences in shaping our cognition, development and our lives in general (Greenspan & Shanker, 2004).

It is worth noting that Dabrowski's insights on the essential role of emotions in human development have preceded the current discoveries by many decades and are, in fact, still waiting to be fully recognized and embraced by today's researchers and theorists.

Even though gifted and talented are not its exclusive focus, Theory of Positive Disintegration utilizes research findings and clinical insights uniquely applicable to developmental needs of gifted and talented individuals.

Its broad scope allows a theoretical integration of scholarship in the areas of personality development, particularly its emotional, moral and spiritual aspects; and various forms of exceptionality.

Although his Theory of Positive Disintegration describes adult development, Dabrowski's interests, training and professional activities centered on children for a large part of his life.

Seeing development as a process based on positive disintegration grew out of clinical studies of creative and talented children, youth and adults, as well as children and adults who were developmentally delayed and psychopathic (Dabrowski, 1984).

Major Tenets of TPD

Positive Disintegration and Levels of Development

Dabrowski believed that the most important aspect of human development is the emotional one, since only in the area of emotional growth, transformation of behavior and character is possible.

He saw development as a progression from the level of primary integration characterized by rigid, automatic and instinctual egocentrism to conscious altruism based on empathy, compassion and self-awareness, expressed the fullest at the highest level of development, the level of secondary integration.

This growth takes place through the process of positive disintegration, which is the loosening and partial, or sometimes global, dismantling of the initial character structure during the course of one's life and replacing it by consciously created personality – the goal of life-long development.

Positive disintegration results from and is expressive of multilevel inner conflicts – conflicts between one's ideals and values (what ought to be) and the existing reality of one's internal and external life (what is), which falls short of those ideals and values.

Those who most readily experience multilevel conflicts are individuals possessing high developmental potential – high and broad, multisided intelligence, special talents and abilities, various global forms of overexcitability and the need and desire for inner transformation – for transcending one's psychological type and constraints of psychobiological maturation process.

The need and desire for inner transformation is an expression of what Dabrowski called the

third factor – the drive behind autonomous, self-conscious, self-chosen and self-determined efforts at guiding one's development.

Most people experience symptoms of disintegration that are related to stages of biological development -- such as adolescence, old age, or menopause -- or difficult life events. These symptoms are temporary and disappear without causing major changes in a person's functioning.

Conflicts, traumas and frustrations, although often cause psychological imbalance in average individuals, do not lead to efforts at self-transformation and further development. However, in individuals with high developmental potential, difficult experiences awaken and/or intensify the need for psychological growth.

As Dabrowski shows – and supports with data obtained from biographies of eminent individuals and case studies of his patients -- difficult life experiences can disintegrate one's psychological unity by introducing inner conflicts, and a subsequent need and ability for reflection, introspection and hierarchization of one's values, feelings, thoughts and actions.

Hierarchization is an expression of multilevelness – the capacity to perceive and experience different developmental levels within us and in our surroundings.

The role of conflict and frustration in the process of development through positive disintegration cannot be overestimated. Dabrowski writes that “positive inner psychic transformation occurs where children and youth do not have all the things necessary to fulfill all their basic needs and where conditions do not lead to the feeling of complete security.

The transformation is more likely to occur where the individuals have only partial satisfaction of their basic needs and where stimuli exist which provoke at least partial dissatisfaction, hierarchization and postulation of an ideal.” (Dabrowski, 1970, p. 35).

In some individuals with high developmental potential, we see a tendency to consciously seek out frustrations in order to facilitate their development. This tendency can be observed early on in development of some children.

Consider Cathy, an exceptionally intellectually gifted 4-year-old, with strong emotional and imaginal overexcitability who, in her parents' description, “likes to scare herself on purpose, imagining that her toys come alive, that bubbles in the paint on the wall will turn into a forest, etc. But she does not like to be comforted then – she wants to work on her fears by herself.”

As both the impetus and vehicle for personality growth, inner conflicts with their attendant negative emotions are expressions of positive mental health and not pathological symptoms.

And because Dabrowski equated development through positive disintegration with mental health, this allowed him to reframe various psychological states commonly considered pathological, such as anxiety, neurosis and depression, as not only largely positive, but, in fact, necessary for personality growth.

The process of positive disintegration, of which psychological difficulties such as emotional suffering of inner conflicts, neuroses and psychoneuroses are most evident signs, is initiated and guided by developmental dynamisms – instinctual-emotional-cognitive forces – present in people endowed with high developmental potential.

Dynamisms, which are intrapsychic factors, are the most potent forces fueling and shaping emotional development. Work of different dynamisms can be observed on each level of development, with the exception of level 1, primary integration, characterized by absence of any developmental dynamisms.

The analysis of dynamisms and their strength allows us to understand whether the process of disintegration has a positive or negative direction.

Personality development through positive disintegration, in Dabrowski's views, is not related to human biological maturation process and does not follow a time schedule, although it progresses along an invariable sequence through a hierarchy of five levels characterized by the predominance of either integration or disintegration on each level.

Level 1: primary integration. On this level we observe work of intelligence subsumed under primitive instincts (sex, aggression, power); rigid, stereotypical, impulsive actions and, in general, behavior controlled by primitive drives and external forces.

Individuals on this level of development experience no inner conflicts, but plenty of external ones.

The great majority of population lives on and rarely grows beyond the level of primary integration. The most primitively integrated character structures are observed in psychopaths and psychopath-like individuals, who suffer from “emotional retardation,” characterized by inability to experience empathy and guilt.

On the level of primary integration, we can observe two forms of adjustment of an individual to society: negative adjustment – non-creative adaptation, characterized by conformity to social conventions, lack of reflection and criticism in approach to reality, adjustment to “what is;” and negative maladjustment, which is disregard for social norms and conventions stemming from extreme egocentrism and ruthless realization of one's lower level goals (psychopaths, criminals).

Level 2: unilevel disintegration. This is the first level where work of disintegrative processes can be observed. Here we see a loosening (disintegration) of the previously well integrated primary character structure as a result of usually external circumstances.

The term “unilevel” denotes lack of hierarchization – ie lack of distinction between “what is” and “what ought to be” in one's internal and external life.

Most characteristic manifestations of unilevel disintegration are ambivalencies and ambitemencies, doubts, hesitations, mood swings, various forms of emotional and psychosomatic disharmony. Dabrowski notes that if inner conflicts on this level are present at

all, they are unilevel – that is, they involve two (or more) opposing options of the same value.

Such conflicts may be severe and may lead to mental disturbances that are very serious and have mostly unconscious character. Because individuals experiencing unilevel conflicts, lacking the ability for inner transformation, do not see a possibility of their positive resolution and further personal growth, the crises engendered by these conflicts often lead to re-integration on level 1, or to severe mental illness and/or suicide.

Level 3: spontaneous multilevel disintegration. On this level, we see the emergence of multilevelness -- a growing sense of “what ought to be” and growing maladjustment to “what is” (positive maladjustment).

Acquiring a multilevel perspective on our inner and external world can be compared to a Copernican revolution in our perception and awareness. Once we learn to distinguish both lower and higher levels in our feelings, thoughts and behaviors; once we understand that we are capable of both evil and good, and that the choice between them is uniquely and exclusively ours; we reach “a point of no return” and we are “doomed to develop,” to use Dabrowski’s words.

The awareness of the lower and the higher leads to inner conflicts and the resultant anxiety, shame, guilt, feelings of inferiority and unhappiness – in other words, positive disintegration. With the emergence of multilevelness, we gain intimate awareness of existence of universal human values which become a guiding force in our development, embedded in a powerful developmental dynamism called the personality ideal.

Actions of individuals experiencing spontaneous multilevel disintegration begin to reflect an emerging autonomous hierarchy of values and goals. Typical for this level are multilevel inner conflicts, expressive of growing self-awareness, self-evaluation and reflection, moral dilemmas, search for an ideal and, often acute, existential anxiety.

On level 3, we observe an emergence of multilevel dynamisms such as disquietude and dissatisfaction with oneself, inferiority with oneself, astonishment with oneself, feelings of shame and guilt, positive maladjustment, creative instinct, and empathy. Unfortunately, many of these dynamisms are often considered symptoms of pathology by mainstream psychiatry.

The difficult experiences associated with spontaneous multilevel disintegration are largely responsible for awakening and deepening sensitivity to other people and to one's own development, and lay foundations for efforts at education of oneself and self-transformation, which become fully engaged at level 4.

In some cases, where one's developmental potential contains strong positive and negative elements, the intensity of the developmental processes on this level can bring an individual close to a “psychic catastrophe” (Dabrowski, 1970, p.60)

Among examples of such dramatic inner transformation, bordering on psychic dissolution, are, listed by Dabrowski, Clifford Beers, Wladyslaw Dawid, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Jack Ferguson, Franz Kafka, Soren Kierkegaard, Abraham Lincoln, John Stuart Mill, and Isaac Newton.

Other examples include Gautama Buddha, St. Paul, St. Francis, St. Augustine, Leo Tolstoy, Blaise Pascal, St. Ignatius Loyola, Alfred de Musset, Heinrich Heine, and St. John of the Cross (Sorokin, 2002), and Adam Chmielowski (Mika, 2004).

Although the above list consists of eminent individuals, there is much evidence showing that lasting inner transformation consistent with the developmental processes described by TPD is a much more common phenomenon (Miller and C'deBaca, 2001, Brennan and Piechowski, 1991).

Level 4: organized multilevel disintegration. This level is characterized by conscious efforts at shaping and systematization of one's behavior, all directed toward conscious and planned self-transformation. Inner conflicts lessen here, replaced by ever-growing autonomy and clarity of values and goals.

External conflicts are largely eliminated through a distinct growth of empathy and compassion, and work of dynamisms such as third factor (active conscience), subject-object in oneself, self-control, education of oneself, inner psychic transformation and self-perfection, all geared toward realizing one's unique and individual personality ideal.

On this level, we can see growing positive adjustment – adjustment to one's personality ideal embracing the highest human values -- adjustment to “what ought to be.”

Level 5: secondary integration. Dabrowski theorized that on this level we could observe harmonization of personality and personality ideal. One's behavior is guided mainly and consistently by dynamisms of responsibility, authenticity and autonomy, empathy, self-perfection and personality ideal.

Psychological development does not end on level 5, but from this point on, it is guided by and consistent with demands of the personality ideal. Empirical data on individuals who obtained level of personality in their development (level 5) are scant.

Nevertheless, Dabrowski and others (Piechowski, 1992; Nixon, 1989; Nixon, 1995; Mika, 2004; Rush & Rush, 1992) have provided biographical analyses of individuals who appear to have reached this level.

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 largely along the integration/disintegration continuum, with varying degrees of both present in most people who possess any measure of developmental potential. From: Mika, 2002)

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
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Developmental Potential

The level a person can attain in her development is determined by her developmental potential.

Developmental potential (DP) is the “original endowment determining the level to which an individual can develop, if his physical and social conditions are optimal.” (Dabrowski, 1984, p.24).

Developmental potential expresses the relationship between individual development and three main groups of factors influencing this development:

1. First factor – genetic and permanent physical traits (intelligence, overexcitabilities, special talents);
2. Second factor – social influences;
3. Third factor – autonomous forces and processes such as self-awareness, conscious inner conflict, free will and conscious self-transformation, etc. Third factor makes self-determination possible and is necessary for creativity and advanced development.

The third factor is rooted in the first two factors – our genes and our environment – but it is an independent force, which propels those endowed with it toward transcending the limitations of their psychological type, their environmental constraints and the human biological cycle.

Dabrowski called the third factor “an active conscience” since it is a basis of conscious selection in our behavior that leads to rejecting unwanted responses – those that go against our values – and affirming and strengthening others – those that express our personality ideal.

DP as a function of all three factors is encountered in cases of accelerated development. Here an individual consciously tries to transcend the limitations of the first and second factors and, in the process, becomes increasingly autonomous and able to direct her own psychological

growth.

DP is particularly strong when it includes all forms of overexcitabilities, especially emotional, imaginal and intellectual; special talents and high intelligence; and the nuclei of the inner psychic milieu that expresses a tendency to transform one's psychological type and transcend the biological cycle.

High DP is frequently encountered in gifted and talented individuals and manifests in their early childhood. In these children, as Dabrowski writes,

“we observe above average abilities in many areas, emotional richness and depth, and multiple and strong manifestations of psychic overexcitability. In individuals so endowed one may observe from childhood difficulties of adjustment, serious developmental crises, psychoneurotic processes, and tendency toward disintegration of lower levels of functioning and reaching toward higher levels of functioning. This, however, does not occur without disturbances and disharmony with their external environment and within their internal environment. Feelings of otherness and strangeness are not uncommon. We find this in gifted children, creative and prominent personalities, men of genius, ie those who contribute new discoveries and new values.” (Dabrowski, 1996, p.22)

DP can be weak when either of the three major components (high intelligence, talents, special interests; overexcitability; desire and will to develop) is weak or absent; or negative when only certain types of overexcitability, namely psychomotor and sensual, are very strong and combined with egocentrism and strong ambition – a developmental constellation encountered in psychopathy.

It is worth noting that giftedness should not be identified with high developmental potential. Indeed, giftedness, if understood only as high intelligence, special interests, talents and abilities, is but one component of DP (first factor).

Making judgments about the strength of one's DP based on the presence of only one of its components may be misleading. Similarly, although the presence of overexcitability is frequently associated with high intelligence and special abilities, acknowledging only the presence and strength of overexcitabilities in itself may indicate neither giftedness nor high DP – and thus it should not be considered “a measure of developmental potential” (Piechowski & Miller, 1994).

Various types and forms of overexcitability are characteristic of many mental disturbances, for example, that do not have anything to do with giftedness or high DP. (However, there are certain exceptions to consider.

We can predict that a child with relatively high level emotional overexcitability, combined with strong intellectual and imaginal types, will also possess high intelligence and a rich inner psychic milieu, with the nuclei of autonomous dynamisms. Indeed, clinical data seem to support this correlation, showing that intellectual overexcitability is always associated with above average intelligence (Mika, 2002).

A high level emotional overexcitability sensitizes such an individual to his inner processes and external world, and creates a foundation for development of inner conflicts facilitating accelerated development. An imaginal overexcitability helps him or her envision his or her personality ideal and the process of personality development.)

To summarize, high developmental potential, in Dabrowski's understanding, includes high (at least average) and broad, theoretical intelligence; overexcitabilities, particularly emotional, imaginal and intellectual; special talents and interests; and autonomous developmental forces. The absence of either of these components will have a limiting influence on a person's development.

Three Types of Development

Dabrowski distinguished three types of development, based on differences in the strength of developmental potential among people. And so, "normal" development applies to the statistical norm, to a so-called average person, whose developmental potential is weak. Normal development is limited to the fulfillment of biological and social imperatives.

Intellectual functions here are typically at least average, while emotional ones remain underdeveloped. There are no or very little attempts at conscious self-transformation. This type of unilevel development is characteristic for the majority of individuals on the levels of primary integration and unilevel disintegration.

The second type, one-sided development, is driven by one particular skill, talent or set of skills; or by especially strong overexcitability in the context of limited overall DP.

As Dabrowski writes, "Only some emotional and intellectual potentials develop very well while the rest remain undeveloped, in fact, (they) appear lacking." (Dabrowski, 1996, p.21) One-sided development is the instance where the presence of giftedness does not aid personality growth, understood in Dabrowskian sense as self-transformation based on multilevel positive disintegration.

In fact, giftedness itself, occurring here within limited developmental potential, while not necessarily a developmental liability, is not an asset either, since it limits development to unilevelness.

One-sided development is often found in cases of genius whose outstanding but isolated talents "hijack" development, to the detriment of other areas of psychological functioning, most importantly its higher emotional and moral aspects.

Dabrowski frequently observed that when highly, but one-sidedly developed, individuals succeed in attaining positions of power (as they often do, since they are unburdened by scruples and inhibitions), they often "cause grave, sometimes disastrous, effects for social groups and societies." (Dabrowski, 1970, p.149).

The two above types of development – normal and one-sided -- are relatively narrow and inflexible, and represent the socio-biological maturational pattern of human species, characterized by progressive psychobiological integration, adjustment to external conditions and often unreflective conformity to social mores.

Symptoms of disintegration, if they appear here at all, are temporary and related to transitional stages of human psychobiological development.

The third and rarest type of development -- global (universal) and accelerated -- is fueled by strong DP. Here “all essential cognitive and emotional functions develop with relatively equal intensity and with relatively equal rate,” (Dabrowski, 1996, p.21); all types of overexcitability are present; but more importantly, there is the self-aware and conscious direction of one's own development.

Such development is characterized by conscious opposition to influences of the first and second factor, and proceeds through intense crises and conflicts that this opposition creates. This type of development transcends the general maturational pattern of the species and shows maladjustment to it that arises from a relatively high degree of independence from biological and social constraints.

Accelerated multilevel development is characteristic for many gifted individuals endowed with overexcitabilities – most notably psychoneurotics, representing level III (and IV) in the TPD hierarchy of developmental levels.

The term “accelerated” here does not denote the speed of developmental changes, but rather breadth and depth of the inner transformation associated with positive disintegration.

As we see then, gifted individuals can be found on all levels of development – from a psychopath with high degree of primary integration, through all stages of unilevel and multilevel disintegration, up to the exemplars of personality at the level of secondary integration.

However, individuals with high developmental potential – a subset of the gifted population - will exhibit signs of positive disintegration already in early childhood. As Dabrowski writes, “Any individual developmental pattern may cover part of the scale but none can cover the full extent of it.” (Dabrowski, 1996, p. 23.)

Thus, theoretically at least, it should follow that individuals attaining the highest levels of development do not start from the level of primary integration. And indeed, biographical data show that in these individuals, the nuclei of high DP are already present in early childhood and so are signs of disintegrative processes to come, such as precursors of multilevel dynamisms that can be observed early on in a relatively small group of children.

Among those precursors are the early capacity to experience strong empathy and compassion, guilt and shame, and early efforts at self-transformation.

Consider Anna (not a real name), an artistically and intellectually gifted 10-year-old girl with mixed types of overexcitability, with the dominance of emotional overexcitability and the remaining types, especially imaginational and intellectual, very strong as well.

At 10, Anna decided to learn yoga in order to overcome her nervousness, and become a more peaceful and relaxed person, someone with whom others feel at peace. Coming from a very modest, working class background, she did not feel her plan would be supported by her family, so she worked on it in secret, using books checked out from her school library.

In her actions, we clearly see dynamisms of self-awareness, subject-object, education of oneself and autopsychotherapy, elements of personality ideal and distinct elements of third factor – all dynamisms of organized multilevel disintegration.

Another example of the presence of ML dynamisms (or their precursors) in children is a statement from a 9-year-old boy, who told his mother that he would like to have an opportunity to look at himself through the eyes of others.

"I'm sure there are things I don't realize about myself, but they must be obvious to others. I think it would be interesting to see how they see me – and it would help me understand myself better."

Clinicians working with gifted population frequently observe signs of advanced moral and emotional development in gifted children. Indeed, examples supporting these observations abound (Silverman, 1993; Lovecky, 1998; Piechowski, 2003.)

However, one should not generalize them on the whole gifted population, since such generalizations are unwarranted and can be misleading (Margolin, 1994.)

Here again, Dabrowski's insights on the three types of development and their relationship to different constellations of developmental potential provide a useful framework for understanding and assessing the complex relationship between giftedness and advanced moral and emotional growth.

It is worth mentioning that Dabrowski associated early manifestations of positive disintegration in gifted children with their asynchronous development (Dabrowski, 1964), which he described over a half a century ago, before the term was introduced to the field of gifted education (Silverman, 2002).

Closely related to the concepts of developmental potential and three types of development are the forces guiding our development, which are higher level instincts, representing a function of an individual's developmental potential.

While developmental instinct is present in the majority of people in at least rudimentary forms, instinct of creativity arises on the basis of special talents and interests, and certain types of overexcitability, imaginational, sensual and emotional in particular.

Creative instinct can be found already on the level of unilevel disintegration, though it gains strength and importance on level III. Creative instinct in itself, however, when not supported by instinct of self-perfection, plays a limited role in the personality growth and often results in one-sided development, or chronic disintegration since it does not awaken the forces of inner transformation.

Instinct of self-perfection is the highest form of developmental instinct, arising at the level of organized multilevel disintegration on the basis of autonomous dynamisms such as third factor, subject-object, self-education, self-awareness, authenticism and personality ideal.

Combined with the instinct of creativity, it usually applies to the whole character of a person, and propels one to grow toward a personality ideal embodying the highest human values. Although these instincts, characteristic of higher levels of psychological development, are not universal, Dabrowski stressed that they exhibited “a force equal in strength or even stronger than that of primitive instincts” such as the sexual instinct or instinct of self-preservation (Dabrowski, 1970, p. 132)

The concepts of developmental, creative and self-perfection instincts are particularly useful in describing developmental trajectories of eminent, multiply talented individuals who progressed to the highest levels of personality development through positive disintegration (Adam Chmielowski, Ety Hillesum, Dag Hammarskjold, Albert Schweitzer, to name just a few).

Analyzing their biographies and written statements leaves us with an appreciation of the intensity of their inner struggles ensuing from often conflicting influences of instincts of creativity and self-perfection -- and it further confirms validity of Dabrowski's insights on development of exceptional individuals.

Overexcitability (OE)

This component of developmental potential deserves special consideration as it is frequently observed in gifted individuals, but perhaps equally frequently misunderstood.

According to Dabrowski, overexcitability is a higher than average capacity for experiencing inner and external stimuli and it is based on a higher than average responsiveness of the nervous system.

In overexcitability, “responses to a variety of stimuli may markedly exceed the value of an average response, they may last significantly longer (although this is not a necessary attribute of overexcitability), and they may occur with greater frequency.” (Dabrowski, 1996, p.71).

Another characteristic of overexcitability is the ease with which psychological experiences based on it are “translated” into symptoms of autonomous nervous system, such as blushing, palpitations, sweating, headaches, stomach butterflies and cramps in response to anxiety, diarrhea, easy fatigue, increased skin sensitivity, etc.

The role of OE in development is a complex one. In Dabrowski's view, overexcitability is responsible for activating the developmental processes as it "(first,) provokes conflicts, disappointments, suffering in family life, in school, in professional life – in short, it leads to conflicts with the external environment.

Overexcitability also provokes inner conflicts as well as the means by which these conflicts can be overcome. Second, overexcitability precipitates psychoneurotic processes, and, third, conflicts and psychoneurotic processes become the dominant factor in accelerated development." (Dabrowski, 1970, p. 38)

Although his interests in nervousness in children date back to the very beginning of his clinical career, Dabrowski first used the term "wzmozona pobudliwosc psychiczna" (increased psychic excitability, or overexcitability) in 1938 to describe certain characteristics and behaviors suggesting nervousness, which he observed in many gifted and talented children.

He distinguished two forms of OE – global and narrow; and five types: psychomotor, sensual, imaginal, intellectual and emotional.

The last three types are crucial for the type of advanced personality development that Dabrowski postulated as characteristic for many gifted individuals, particularly for those whose achievement, while not necessarily rewarding them with fame and eminence, was to attain the highest level of emotional and moral growth.

Psychomotor overexcitability is a manifestation of a heightened energy level, and can be observed in restlessness, rapid and pressured speech, predilection for violent games and sports, pressure for action, or delinquent behavior.

In its 'pure' form, it is a manifestation of the excess of energy; but it may also result from the transfer of emotional tension to psychomotor forms of expression such as those mentioned above. Cases of tics and self-mutilation, for example, suggest psychomotor OE, which originates in emotional tension.

Dabrowski was keenly interested in self-mutilation as a phenomenon suggestive of higher than average sensitivity and DP. His Ph.D. dissertation on "Psychological basis of self-mutilation," first published in 1934 and printed in English three years later, showed the co-existence of self-mutilatory tendencies, creativity and strong developmental strivings in a select group of creative individuals (Dabrowski, 1937).

As Dabrowski observed, in people with psychomotor OE, the slightest stimulus evokes a strong reaction. Being accidentally touched in a crowd, being opposed in a discussion, cut off in traffic - any and all minimal frustrations can cause irritation or angry outbursts.

These individuals are internally and unconsciously motivated to seek higher than average stimulation, because when their internal tension becomes too low, they experience it as a state of anxiety and inner discomfort.

A person with psychomotor OE experiencing such a state of “nervous deprivation” will seek appropriate – and sometimes not so appropriate – stimulation to increase the inner tension and then to release it.

As Dabrowski writes,

"The real difficulties (for children with psychomotor overexcitability) start with the beginning of formal education. The greatest numbers of children who obtain bad grades for behavior come from this group. These are children who fidget in their chairs, disrupt their peers' work, play with pens and notebooks, have thousands of excuses to leave the classroom, and show severe fluctuations in attention. After school, and even during school, they start and lead fights and other physical escapades.

"Boys, who excel in independence and exhibit tendencies to rebellion at school, are most frequently individuals with psychomotor OE. Their difficulties are particularly strong in adolescence, but they are also abundant in other periods. During adolescence, psychomotor OE takes on the form of truancy and wandering. Among children hanging from the back of a tram, among those who sell newspapers (on the streets), tramps or those who travel without a ticket, we meet primarily these types. In schoolwork and adult employment these individuals are characterized by unevenness or breaks in the work patterns.

"They have periods of great intensity at work; in some, we find shorter or longer weakening of ability to work. These individuals are incapable of sustained effort, and are explosive at their workplace. Their work interests diverge in many different directions, and we often see frequent changes from one job or subject to another. In youth, we see tendencies to change schools, in young adults - jobs." (Dabrowski, 1964, p.76, trans. E. Mika)

It is easy to see that Dabrowski's description of manifestations of psychomotor OE is remarkably similar to symptoms of the condition known today as ADHD. Indeed, Dabrowski's views on possible origins of psychomotor OE as well as management strategies for its manifestations are not at all different from contemporary views on etiology and treatment of ADHD (Dabrowski, 1964).

Unfortunately, this facet of Dabrowski's work is less known in the US and this has resulted in a belief prevalent in the field of gifted education -- a belief unsupported by facts -- that gifted children with psychomotor OE tend to be “misdiagnosed” with ADHD.

Sensual overexcitability is a manifestation of a heightened sensitivity to sensory stimuli, particularly to sensory pleasure. In the narrow form of sensual overexcitability, the unusual intensity of reactions is limited to one sensual sphere (visual, auditory, tactile, or olfactory); the global form, on the other hand, encompasses the whole character structure and all senses equally.

Children with global sensual overexcitability have an increased need to touch and be touched, hugged, and kissed; they frequently exhibit early signs of sexual interests and development; and like to flirt and behave seductively as they get older.

Most either like to eat and/or are picky eaters, are interested in food preparation, and like to smell their food (and often everything else).

As Dabrowski observed, they like to be the center of attention, approach others without hesitation and start conversations easily; and are prone to self-adoration, confabulations, and drama in their everyday life. They usually exhibit strong aesthetic interests and are drawn to artistic professions and pursuits.

On the negative side, people endowed with dominant sensual OE may lack the ability for reflection, planning and systematic effort – they tend to live “here and now,” dislike serious thought and intellectual analysis.

Their interpersonal relationships are often characterized by excessive sociability, an inability to tolerate being alone, a superficial attitude toward loss and death, little interest in lives of others, lack of responsibility, and a tendency to externalize problems and blame others.

“As with the psychomotor form, (sensual OE) also may, but need not be, a manifestation of a transfer of emotional tension to sensual forms of expression of which the most common examples are overeating and excessive sexual stimulation.” (Dabrowski, 1996, p.72)

Imaginational overexcitability is an imbalance in information processing that is skewed toward internal, image-based mode, with a relative exclusion of sensual, affective and psychomotor spheres. For individuals with a dominant imaginational OE, external stimuli matter usually as fodder for their imagination, rather than on their own merit.

Children with high imaginational overexcitability are less able than others to distinguish facts from fiction, are prone to illusions and daydreams, loose associations, lucid dreams, hypnotic trances, sometimes even hallucinations.

A child with a particularly strong and unbalanced imaginational OE may consider his fantasy world to be more real than his external reality. As Dabrowski notes, these children have a difficult time in schools, especially in areas that do not interest them – they may react with sadness, lack of appetite, or depression to school requirements; and are often considered odd, distractible and sickly by others.

Children with imaginational OE mature slowly and even in adulthood show symptoms of immaturity (so-called positive infantilism). The period of fantasy and magical thinking in their development is typically prolonged, and flirtation and sexual experimentation are very weak, or absent.

Their first sexual attachment is often a failure, since they are not very skilled in choosing appropriate partners. However, their love failures, even though intense, do not leave major wounds since they are compensated for in their imagination.

Frequently, persons with strong imaginational OE seek relationships with older and mature partners who can provide for their necessary daily living needs as well as offer protection and security.

Children (and adults) with this type of OE frequently show aesthetic interests in art, poetry and music. They like to spend time alone or in very small groups of select peers and relatives. They do not like games and sports, but love to read and think.

Sometimes they lose the distinction between their dreams and reality. Imaginational OE combined with emotional OE intensifies the tendency to prospection and retrospection, as well as maladjustment to external reality, often leading to positive disintegration.

Intellectual overexcitability is the rarest type of OE and one with the least clinical implications. In this type of OE, a person's receiving and processing information as well as decision-making are localized in the cognitive sphere.

Children with the dominant intellectual OE ponder intellectual problems earlier and longer; show high perceptiveness; tend to develop good skills in logical analysis and are less prone to magical thinking; and early on become critical and independent thinkers.

This type of overexcitability is most frequently associated with exceptional intellectual and academic abilities in children (Dabrowski, 1964; Mika, 2002).

Its presence usually does not create any special developmental/clinical challenges and difficulties, apart from a possible developmental imbalance skewed toward a theoretical (vs. practical) approach to life, and possible disharmony between intellectual and other forms of maturity. Intellectual OE is often associated with certain socio-emotional immaturity (positive infantilism).

Global form of intellectual OE is frequently found in individuals of mixed introversion/extraversion type. When combined with emotional and imaginational OE, global intellectual overexcitability aids the development of a rich mental structure with multiple talents and great self-awareness.

A narrow form of intellectual OE is often encountered in schizoid and strongly introverted types, and it is characterized by one-sided development of specific abilities. As Dabrowski notes, such development usually leads to life difficulties that may end in negative disintegration, or stunted mental growth.

Emotional overexcitability is a function of experiencing emotional relationships. The relationships can manifest themselves as strong attachment to persons, living things, or places.

“From the developmental point of view, intensity of feelings and display of emotions alone are not developmentally significant unless the experiential aspect of relationship is present.” (Dabrowski, 1996, p.72)

This distinction is of crucial importance, because only through learning based on reciprocal relationships, a child can develop the capacity for experiencing higher level emotions and multilevel dynamisms such as guilt and shame, empathy, compassion, subject-object in oneself.

Children with high emotional OE show an early development of a strong affective life. These are the children who cry easily, are easily frightened and anxious, exhibit strong attachments to people, places and objects; as well as strong envy and anger.

Their intense emotional reactions are frequently signs of a higher than average need for security and safety. Other signs of emotional OE include excessive inhibition and excitation, strong affective memory, concern and preoccupations with death; “depressions, feelings of loneliness, need for security, concern for others, exclusive relationships, difficulties of adjustment in new environments (insomnia, irritability and lack of appetite), etc.” (Dabrowski, 1996).

Teenagers with the dominant emotional OE are often perceived as infantile, naïve, lost, shy, non-competitive and immature. On the one hand, they are prone to experiencing shame and guilt; on the other, they tend to be overly open and trusting toward others – a combination, which, unfortunately, predisposes them to being taken advantage of by unscrupulous individuals.

People with dominant emotional OE develop relationships of friendship and love usually with very few or only one person. Because such close and exclusive relationships are the source of meaning in their lives, any losses and betrayals have a lasting, and sometimes devastating, effect on them.

Their sensitivity often increases as a result of difficult life experiences, and may lead to extreme self-analysis, and tendencies to meditation and isolation.

As Dabrowski observed, in some individuals with dominant emotional OE, chronic anxiety related to shyness may become a dominating personality trait that leads to excessive self-criticism, distrust and sensitivity to rejection.

Another danger for high emotional OE person is a tendency toward overidentification with others to the point of losing oneself in the emotional world of another, to the detriment of one's own well-being and growth. (Dabrowski, 1964)

However, when endowed with equally strong imaginal and intellectual OE, individuals with strong emotional OE can, and often do, sublimate and transform the pain and suffering that result from their excessive emotional sensitivity into creative and humanitarian efforts.

Emotional OE is expressed differently in extraverted and introverted individuals. In extraverts, emotional reactions are strong, fast, uninhibited and often explosive, although they quickly subside. Extraverts with emotional OE tire easily, but equally easily recover.

In introverts, on the other hand, emotional reactions are strong, but “delayed” -- they take longer (days, weeks, or months) to develop, and leave a permanent mark on the psyche.

It is important to note that the “delay” does not reflect a slowed-down reaction, but the need to reflect on a given situation and absorb its emotional content.

In an introvert endowed with emotional OE, emotional fatigue also occurs easily, though it builds up slowly and lasts longer. In introverts with strong emotional OE, we see positive maladjustment and a strong desire to transcend here and now.

They experience longings for a better reality and frequently escape into daydreaming, and show tendencies toward reflection and hierarchization of their goals and values, which protect them from depression in face of failure. Introverts with strong emotional OE usually display a strong affective memory and preoccupation with death and immortality.

Like the remaining overexcitabilities, emotional OE also manifests in two forms: global – as subtle and oversensitive consciousness and conscience; and narrow – in phobias, compulsions, excessive self-analysis and self-mutilation, which allow to focus free-floating anxiety in one fixed point and discharge it there.

The three overexcitabilities crucial for personality development are emotional, imaginal and intellectual. Sensual and psychomotor overexcitabilities play important, but supporting roles in development, according to Dabrowski.

Emotional, imaginal and intellectual OE, apart from sensitizing and increasing overall psychological receptivity to internal and external stimuli, help one develop attitudes of prospection and retrospection, bring unconscious contents to one's awareness and allow for their processing and integration, thus freeing great amounts of psychic energy, necessary for creativity.

The presence of multiple forms and types of OE increases richness of one's inner experiences, and by its dynamic, unstable, and, in cases of multiple strong OE, oppositional character, leads to frequent inner and external conflicts which often give rise to dynamisms of positive disintegration.

Such conflicts let us see different levels of our own experiences and intensify our growth through increasing our self-awareness, which becomes the basis of development through positive disintegration.

But overexcitability in itself is not always a positive developmental feature. Certain forms of emotional, sensual and psychomotor OE, for example, are associated with a host of psychological problems, which may have nothing to do with giftedness or high developmental potential.

And it does not take a clinician to notice that many manifestations of OE are recognized as part of symptomatology of various developmental disorders (Asperger's Syndrome, ADHD, sensory integration dysfunction).

In his 1964 "Socio-educational Child Psychiatry" textbook, Dabrowski presented guidelines for diagnostic differentiation between OE and psychological disorders.

While overexcitabilities dynamize inner development by propelling some individuals – those with high developmental potential -- to experience internal conflicts, which in turn give rise to efforts at self-education and self-transformation; in others, they may create tensions that are too difficult to absorb or resolve, and lead to serious psychological problems (Dabrowski, 1970).

Like with everything else in life, when it comes to OE, it is not as much what we have that matters most, but what we do with what we have.

As Dabrowski said,

“Oversensitivity (OE) without inner psychic transformation brings many unnecessary conflicts with others – magnifies the differences, and lessens and obscures the most important things.” (Dabrowski, 1972, pp.32-33)

Unraveling Terman's fallacy

Even though the association between genius, or exceptional abilities and nervousness or mental instability, has been entrenched in the common wisdom and supported by a wealth of data (Taylor, 1983), the prevailing belief in the field of gifted education maintained that gifted children were well-adjusted paragons of mental health.

This tendency to attribute exceptional mental health to intellectually gifted individuals dates back to Lewis Terman and his longitudinal studies of 1,500 high IQ children (Shurkin, 1992).

One of explicit goals of Terman's research was to disprove the notion that gifted children were more sensitive or nervous than average youngsters. He thus assessed a general category of “nervous disturbances” - which included such behaviors like restlessness, nail biting, teeth grinding, excitability, sensitivity, stuttering and sleep difficulties - by asking parents and teachers whether a child was “especially nervous.”

According to his findings, “nervousness” was reported less frequently in the gifted group than in the controls, while “timidity” and a tendency to worry were equally frequent in both groups. In general, gifted boys were only slightly more nervous than the non-gifted ones; while gifted girls were less nervous than their non-gifted counterparts.

Based on these findings, Terman concluded that gifted children were indeed in a very good psychological and physical health, certainly free from excessive nervousness.

But his data revealed a positive correlation between exceptional intellectual giftedness and different forms of mental and social maladjustment – a finding corroborated by others (Hollingworth, Gross, 2003).

Terman's study has been subsequently criticized for its flaws, and a closer look at his research reveals inevitable biases and omissions that crept into it and influenced what the author saw, and - perhaps more importantly - what he did not see.

Although Terman denied higher than average nervousness of gifted children, he observed that

one of their difficulties as students had to do with their excessive tendency to daydream and problems with adjusting to demands of structured school settings - both of which are symptoms of overexcitabilities, as defined by Dabrowski.

Dabrowski referenced Terman's study in his work, pointing out that Terman's analysis of gifted children's mental health differed from his own in several respects (Dabrowski, 1970).

Curiously, Terman, who showed signs of intellectual precocity from an early childhood, was a highly nervous individual himself. The twelfth of fourteen children, young Lewis had to cope with the constant threat of tuberculosis, an illness that ran in his family and claimed the life of his older sister.

Her death affected 3-year-old Lewis so deeply that even in adulthood he suffered from insomnia aggravated by fears of a similar fate. As a grown-up, he developed a rigid and compulsive daily health regimen designed to protect him from recurring bouts of the illness.

An obsessive attention to details and control needs characterized both his work and personal life. Lonely, acutely aware of his uniqueness as a child and young man, Lewis exhibited strong ambition and intellectual strivings, augmented by his nervous temperament.

Describing his university seminars with Stanley Hall, Terman wrote this in his biography:

"I always went home dazed and intoxicated, took a hot bath to quiet my nerves, then lay awake for hours, rehearsing the drama and formulating the clever things I should have said and did not." (Shurkin, 1992, p. 96).

Even this brief confession shows an introverted young man with both emotional and intellectual overexcitabilities. Why Terman would not identify his own behaviors as expressive of nervousness and denied the existence of similar traits in his subjects is a matter of speculation, which goes beyond the subject of this presentation.

Although the questions about the co-existence of nervousness and exceptional abilities in both children and adults occasionally resurface, there is overwhelming evidence, both from clinical and research data, that supports the correlation between the two phenomena.

Many clinicians working with gifted children have independently observed and described these children's unusual sensitivity and intensity, which often set them apart from their less talented peers.

In several books, Dabrowski quoted his own research on gifted children. In one of the studies, conducted in Warsaw in 1962, he analyzed psychological characteristics of 80 gifted and talented children and youth (Dabrowski, 1967).

The study concluded that all gifted children and young people displayed symptoms of increased psychoneurotic excitability, or lighter or more serious psychoneurotic symptoms.

Dabrowski also discussed his research comprising 175 highly gifted and talented children and youth from Poland and Canada. According to the results, 85% of his subjects exhibited different forms of OE as well as neuroses and psychoneuroses.

Among over 200 eminent individuals from different fields whose biographies he studied, Dabrowski and his collaborators found that 97% of them showed different forms of OE, particularly emotional, imaginal and intellectual, neuroses and psychoneuroses, and also disturbances bordering on psychoses (Dabrowski, 1979).

He quoted findings of other clinicians who observed that most children with increased psychic excitability and with neurotic symptoms belonged to the category of gifted and talented. (Dabrowski, 1964).

Studies on overexcitabilities and giftedness have been continued in the US in the field of gifted education. For a brief overview of relevant research, see O'Connor (2002).

Additional support for Dabrowski's conclusions on the relationship between creativity and overexcitability (not called that) has come from research in clinical psychology and psychiatry. Several relevant studies are summed up in Jamison's book, "Touched with fire," which examines the relationship between manic-depressive illness and artistic temperament.

In her newest book, "Exuberance," Jamison examines lives of eminent individuals whose psychological make-up is shaped by hyperthymic temperament or manic-depressive predispositions (Jamison, 2005) – both characterized by behaviors typical of overexcitabilities.

This theme has been continued in J. Gartner's recently published book, "The Hypomanic Edge" (2005), where he examines lives of American successful entrepreneurs and historical figures endowed with overexcitabilities (though, obviously, Gartner does not use this term).

Although Gartner's examples do not represent cases of advanced (or advancing) personality development as understood by Dabrowski, they nevertheless illustrate the correlation between certain forms of creativity and increased psychic excitability.

Inadvertently, too, Gartner's examples show negative influences that OE – not tempered and not transformed by empathy and reflection -- can have on personality development.

Some recent studies that confirm Dabrowski's insights into the relationship between traits strongly suggestive of increased psychic excitability and creativity include Strong and Ketter (2002), Carson et al. (2001), and Carson et al. (2003).

Strong and Ketter, for example, found that healthy (non-diagnosed) creative individuals are closer in their personality types to manic-depressives than to normal population as they exhibited higher than normal range of mood changes and personality characteristics related to neuroticism.

The authors attributed these findings to the wider emotional range in the creative individuals. The “wider emotional range” appears to be nothing else but Dabrowski's OE, described for the first time almost 70 years ago.

Apart from the research that continues in the field of gifted education, confirmations of Dabrowski's ideas on development, including his views on positive disintegration as a method of autopsychotherapy and personality development, have come from fields of psychiatry and neuropsychology (Schwartz & Begley, 2002).

Conclusions

Dabrowski considered his theory “work in progress” – “a series of inductive empirical generalizations” (Dabrowski, 1970, p. 130) – and expressed hope that, with time, most, if not all, of these generalizations would be either confirmed, modified or reformulated thanks to new research and theoretical insights.

Luckily, we do not have to wait until all tenets of Dabrowski's theory achieve a solid backing from research data (that is, if such an accomplishment were possible in the first place). The benefits of adopting a TPD-based perspective in looking at human development appear obvious.

The convergence of developmental psychopathology and psychology of exceptionalism seen in TPD is a source of a new, and very promising, approach to treating human growth in its exceptional, as well as “normal” and “disordered” aspects.

One of Dabrowski's greatest contributions to our understanding of exceptionalism and human development in general is the appreciation of the positive developmental value of various psychological difficulties, including many conditions commonly considered as pathological only.

For one, we can no longer remain satisfied with labeling traits such as overexcitability and developmental experience they engender as “pathological,” since, as Dabrowski showed us, hidden behind the stigmatizing labels are individuals full of “creative restlessness (and the drive) to penetrate higher levels of reality” (Dabrowski, 1979, p. 187).

Conversely, heeding Dabrowski's findings, we are able to become more aware of dangers of one-sided development associated with extreme developmental asynchrony, often encountered in gifted individuals.

The problems resulting from using intelligence in the service of most basic, primitive drives – a tendency associated with psychopathy – are especially evident in today's world.

TPD offers not only a useful theoretical framework for understanding individual differences and personality development, but also practical solutions for affecting positive change, particularly (though not only) in education and clinical practice.

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