

POTENTIAL FOR POSITIVE DISINTEGRATION AND IQ

by Laurence Nixon, PhD

At the end of a joint presentation with Michael Pyryt, at The Sixth International Congress of the Institute For Positive Disintegration in Human Development (June 24-26, 2004, Calgary, Alberta, Canada), Sal Mendaglio suggested that a high IQ was a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for positive disintegration. Some agreed with Sal and some, including myself, disagreed. Subsequently I looked through Dabrowski's writings to see what was his position on the matter. From what I have read, it seems clear that Dabrowski holds the position articulated by Sal, and that, furthermore, he provides data to support that view, i.e., that a certain IQ, is a necessary condition for positive disintegration.

There is no question that something Dabrowski refers to as a "high level of intelligence" is one among many factors that can help to loosen the structure of primary integration, thus facilitating the development of personality (for normal persons).

Among normal primitively integrated people, different degrees of cohesion of psychic structure can be distinguished. The tendency to develop disintegration may be present in greater or lesser degree, but the elements of disintegration are much more feeble than the forces of integration. However, external stress, a high level of intelligence, and a capacity for introspection can help loosen the psychic structure and thus increase the potential for growth. (1964:66-67)

And wherever Dabrowski refers to intelligence in a diagnosis of a client, high intelligence is found with other factors that indicate a good prognosis (in terms of developmental potential) and average or low intelligence is mentioned as being characteristic of persons without much developmental potential. For example of one patient he regarded as having a good prognosis he says,

Outstanding affective and imaginal sensitivity, fairly well-developed ability for transposing psychic experience onto the autonomic nervous system. Strong preponderance of higher levels of emotional life, considerable capacity for inner psychic

transformation (when he came for treatment he was looking for help in changing himself, he understood that individual development requires universal attention to human values, and that it cannot be achieved alone). Inner psychic milieu distinctly in hierarchical order. Outstanding intelligence with more facility for the theoretical than the practical. Some original traits in thinking. Multidirectional abilities. Reality function well developed at higher levels of mental life, and poorly developed at the lower, everyday level.... (1972:83)

But for a 38 year old woman, for whom the prognosis was "doubtful in the sense of positive development" (1972:88), Dabrowski, in his report on the psychiatric examination describes her as,

Rather sure of herself, authoritarian, weak inhibition, marked ambivalence. Medium level of intelligence, more practical than theoretical. Intelligence in the service of strong basic drives, rigidity of thinking (stereotypy).... (1972:86)

Thus for the person with good prospects for personality development his intelligence was said to be "outstanding;" but for the person whose prospects were doubtful, her intelligence was said to be merely "medium." In addition it was said that her intelligence was more practical than theoretical.

This distinction, made by Dabrowski, between "practical intelligence" and "theoretical (or creative or intuitive) intelligence" is one that is relevant to the question of developmental potential. The latter is what is required for development, the former may also be of value but only if combined with the latter. Ideally they should both be present.

If we find in a given individual the group of characteristics of accelerated development, a highly developed inner psychic milieu (which includes, for example, the third factor, the dynamism of inner psychic transformation, autonomy, authenticity, empathy, and the ideal of personality), with distinct creative intelligence and a fairly good practical intelligence, we will have a fairly objective picture of an individual in relation to whom we can clearly foresee his further development in the direction of a creative, empathic, and authentic personality. (1973:185-186)

But if there is only theoretical intelligence, of a high enough level, it is sufficient. Practical intelligence is not absolutely necessary. Case 6 in *Psychoneurosis is not an illness* is an example. This is a young 23 year old man with a good prognosis for development. Of him Dabrowski says,

Outstanding affective and imaginational sensitivity, fairly well-developed ability for transposing psychic experience onto the autonomic nervous system. Strong preponderance of higher levels of emotional life, considerable capacity for inner psychic transformation (when he came for treatment he was looking for help in changing himself, he understood that individual development requires universal attention to human values, and that it cannot be achieved alone). Inner psychic milieu distinctly in hierarchical order. Outstanding intelligence with more facility for the theoretical than the practical. Some original traits in thinking. (1972:83)

A lower level of practical intelligence when combined with a higher level of theoretical intelligence is not a barrier to personality development. On the other hand the reverse situation does not hold out much promise for development. Of normal persons Dabrowski says,

The most frequent and thus "normal" traits express themselves in the following norms: practical rather than theoretical intelligence, predominantly egocentric rather than theoretical intelligence, predominantly egocentric rather than alterocentric attitudes toward society, and preponderance of the self-preservation, sexual, exploratory, and social instincts. These traits are commonly in compliance with group thinking and behavior and are often accompanied by minor, "safe" dishonesty. (1964:113)

So it seems that intelligence is a necessary condition for development, but the kind of intelligence required is what Dabrowski calls theoretical. There is another type of intelligence, practical, which is not undesirable, but its presence is not a necessary condition.

However to what does Dabrowski refer when he uses the word, "intelligence." In some cases it would be reasonable to suspect he is referring not to the

intelligence quotient but to intellectual overexcitability. In the following passage Dabrowski associates emotional immaturity (a sign of potential for development) with emotional overexcitability, imaginational overexcitability and intelligence (as well as other characteristics).

...the most frequent instances of the so-called emotional immaturity occur in children, youths and adults with distinct sensitivity and intelligence; in children that show, at the same time, excessive sincerity, impulsiveness, emotional and imaginational overexcitability, distinct creative potential and a below average capacity for social adjustment combined with tendencies toward adjustment to value of a higher level...they require more time to satisfy their rich emotional and intellectual needs and, thus, to become ready for future more serious experiences. They mature slowly or show persistent forms of immaturity and potential for further development. (1973:154)

Dabrowski speaks of intelligence along with emotional and imaginational overexcitability, and further speaks of rich intellectual needs, a description that seems to hint at intellectual overexcitability rather than I.Q., thus making it seem reasonable to interpret the use of "intelligence" as being equivalent to intellectual overexcitability. However the association is merely suggestive of what Dabrowski means by the word intelligence, it is not solid evidence. More convincing is the following passage in which Dabrowski actually defines (in parentheses) the word intelligence as intellectual overexcitability.

An increased psychic excitability encompasses enhanced excitability of affect, imagination, psychomotor and sensual reactions, and intelligence (intellectual excitability). From these develops a wider spectrum of feelings, an increased field of consciousness, and a greater and more complex pattern of excitation and inhibition. Psychic overexcitability is one of the recognizable components of the developmental potential. (1972:65)

So now we know that, in Dabrowski's written works, at least one meaning of the word intelligence is intellectual overexcitability and not intelligence

quotient. Could it be, that when Dabrowski refers to intelligence as being necessary for personality development he is referring to intellectual overexcitability and not a high intelligence quotient?

The problem with such a position is that there are other passages in Dabrowski's writings where he refers to both intelligence and to intellectual overexcitability as if they were two distinct qualities. In fact in many places he is deliberately distinguishes "intelligence" from intellectual overexcitability. One such passage is his description of intellectual overexcitability at primary integration.

Intellectual activity consists mainly of skillful manipulation of data and information ("a brain like a computer"). Intelligence rather than intellectual overexcitability serves as an instrument subservient to the dictates of primitive drives. (1996:78)

In this description it is clear that intelligence can exist at level I (in the service of primitive drives) but it is some quality other than intellectual overexcitability. But intelligence is not just neutral. True it can be in the service of lower impulses, but it can also serve a developmental function, as we can see from Dabrowski's description of role of intelligence in one of his clients.

In Example no. 6 intelligence is very much in the service of development and it is creative. It is enriched by imaginal and intellectual overexcitability. It strongly contributes to subject-object in oneself and to autopsychotherapy. (1996:183)

Here intelligence combines with intellectual (and imaginal) overexcitability to facilitate the emergence of level IV dynamisms. So it seems that sometimes intelligence is used synonymously with intellectual overexcitability, but not always, and probably not usually. Thus in addition to intellectual overexcitability there is a quality referred to as intelligence which is also desirable from the perspective of the theory of positive disintegration. But is this quality the same thing as the intelligence quotient. If it is then it is clear that a high intelligence quotient is at least desirable.

Speculation on this matter is unnecessary,

because in several instances Dabrowski explicitly refers to the importance of a high intelligence quotient for positive development. But before we look at those passages, it would be useful to see more clearly how Dabrowski understands intellectual overexcitability and intelligence (in the sense of an intelligence quotient). By intellectual overexcitability, Dabrowski means, among other things, intellectual curiosity.

For the purposes of our research intelligence was evaluated using the Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale. In addition, the material contained in the Autobiography and the Verbal Stimuli was used for an evaluation of the role of intelligence in development. In this case we were looking at intellectual functioning in relation to emotional development. Here caution: intellectual overexcitability should not be confused with intellectual functioning and intelligence. Under the term intellectual overexcitability we put those forms of enhanced reactivity which are expressed in logical and causal cognition focused on finding answers to probing questions. (1996:182)

In this passage Dabrowski is telling us that, in his research he was interested in both intelligence, as measured by the WAIS, and the role of intelligence in development, as measured by a content analysis of clients' autobiographies and the Verbal Stimuli test, two methods used to determine the presence of the overexcitabilities, including intellectual overexcitability. In the quote above, Dabrowski is saying that intellectual overexcitability is the application of intelligence (or what is measured by the WAIS) to development. Intelligence and intellectual overexcitability work together, even though they can be distinguished one from the other. Intellectual overexcitability is the tendency to ask probing, or meaningful, questions. But what, in terms of the theory of positive disintegration, is intelligence as measured by the WAIS?

Dabrowski categorizes the intelligence quotient, as determined by the WAIS, as a general ability (or perhaps a set of general abilities—e.g., verbal, visual-spatial); and general abilities are distinguished by Dabrowski from what he calls special abilities.

The term outstanding abilities denotes abilities (in any field of a man's life) which permit him to achieve results considerably surpassing the average standard accepted for individuals of the same age, education, and so forth. In our examinations we came into contact with two kinds of capabilities: general and special. Outstanding general abilities were noted in children from elementary schools who were able to attain higher than average results in general learning on tests (though in school they did not always attain these results). The I.Q. of this group (general ability) ranged from 120 to 146. General abilities were divided into humanistic, mathematical, and natural. Outstanding special abilities were possessed by children attending art schools. Manifestations of these abilities differentiated into theatrical, dancing, plastic art, and finally into musical abilities. All the examined children who possessed special abilities had an I.Q. rating of between 110 and 155, that is to say they were, at the same time, generally intellectually capable. (1967:251-252)

For Dabrowski developmental potential, or potential for positive disintegration and positive secondary integration, consists of psychic overexcitability (emotional, imaginal, intellectual, sensual and psychomotor), indicators of multilevelness, special interests, special abilities (or capabilities or talents) and general abilities (including a high intelligence quotient). While Dabrowski distinguishes between general and special abilities, he has observed they are often found together, and that they are in turn associated with indicators of multilevelness.

There are a number of descriptions of individual case studies in which Dabrowski provides the I.Q. of the individual under examination. And in all of these a high I.Q. is associated with qualities, from psychoneurosis to special abilities, that imply positive developmental potential, and frequently Dabrowski explicitly states that their prognosis for development is a good one. Here are three examples:

During the preschool period Ella had been an obedient girl but from time to time emotionally overexcitable...She had always had a great deal of inhibition. At 4 1/2 she had begun to discuss with her parents the problems of loss, of death, and of life after death....Ella's I.Q. was 128.Ella was an

introvert with rather schizothymic traits....and inclined to be emotionally overexcitable....she leaned toward moral and social concerns. She presented the type of emotional tension very closely related to psychic development.... We see in this case a fairly early stage of positive disintegration with emotional overexcitability, ambivalences, and the initial formation of the psychic internal environment. (1967:196-197)

Below we give an example of a set of anxiety neurosis with neurasthenic and hypochondriacal components:

Boy, aged 8, in third grade of an elementary school, good educational conditions. Doing very well in school subjects, 136 I.Q. Wechsler test. Creative ability in drawing. Theoretical interests, humanistic....Timid in new situations.... (1967:254)

An example of hysterical sets with psychic emotional overexcitability and anxiety follows:

Girl, aged 20, with good home background; 116 I.Q. Outstanding ability in all general subjects, and in dancing and acting.

As one may see from the above examples the psychoneurotic symptoms were often displayed by great tension which caused frequent conflicts with the environment. They often lead to a dissipation of the positive developmental qualities... (1967:254-255)

In the three case studies cited above, there was a good prognosis, from the perspective of the theory of positive disintegration, and in all three the I.Q. was well above average.

Well even if it is the case that a high I.Q. is frequently found in persons with overexcitability, with special abilities, with highly developed interests, is it necessarily the case that those with a low I.Q. have little if any potential for positive development? This is, in fact, Dabrowski's understanding, and his position is not based on pure speculation, but rather on research.

The author's clinical experience and investigations demonstrated the existence of positive correlation between outstanding abilities and periods of psychic disequilibrium (especially psychoneuroses) and of negative correlation between mental deficiency and neurotic behavior. Clinical studies that support this

conclusion can be summarized as follows:

(1) Psychiatric examinations of 170 normal children carried out in public schools, schools of fine arts, and the Academy of Physical Education, by the Institute of Mental Hygiene and the Children's Psychiatric Institute in Warsaw have shown that about 85% of the subjects with I.Q. from 120 to 150 have various symptoms of nervousness and slight neurosis, such as mild anxiety, depression, phobias, inhibitions, slight tics and various forms of overexcitability.

(2) The examination of about 75 mentally retarded children in Poland and in Canada has not revealed traits or syndromes which can be properly called psychoneurotic. The absence of psychoneurotic syndromes in mental retardation has been confirmed by many other studies and is generally accepted. (1970:18-19)

Based on Dabrowski's own research it can be said that Sal's hypothesis is a reasonable one, namely that mentally retarded children show no signs of developmental potential and that many (85%), but not all, of those with a high I.Q. do possess some measure of developmental potential. In other words, a high I.Q. is a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition for personality development.

However, quite apart from the ongoing need for replicating research results, there remain some unanswered questions. The first is, what level of I.Q. is absolutely required for positive disintegration? Dabrowski reports that, for all the children he examined who had both general and special abilities, the lowest I.Q. score was 110. This would suggest that an I.Q. at or above 110 meets the level required for personality development. And if we take as our definition of mental retardation, or cognitive disability, an I.Q. of 70 or less, then an I.Q. at or below 70, according to Dabrowski's research, is not sufficient for personality growth. So we know that the necessary I.Q. is somewhere between 70 and 110, but (if 10 points on the WAIS is one standard deviation) this range covers over 80% of the population! It would be helpful to have a more precise idea of what level of intelligence is absolutely required. Another question, actually a double question, is, to what extent is I.Q. a result of a stimulating and supportive environment, and correspondingly, to what extent is cognitive disability a

result of a lack of a stimulating and supportive environment and of being socially marginalized as a result of being labeled "retarded?"

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