

Kazimierz Dąbrowski's Theory of Positive Disintegration (TPD)

Synopsis by William Tillier 2021

Kazimierz Dąbrowski (1902-1980) developed the Theory of Positive Disintegration (TPD) to describe psychological development. Dąbrowski's approach is a precursor of the modern field of post-traumatic growth research. Dąbrowski felt no existing theory of psychology could explain the wide differences seen in human behavior. TPD is a broad and complex approach, with many interrelated and unique constructs. Although in many ways unusual, TPD has a solid basis in philosophy, psychology and neurology. In constructing TPD, Dąbrowski reinterpreted existing psychological constructs and introduced new ones.

TPD has many potential applications, including in psychology, psychotherapy, education, philosophy, ethics, science, history, sociology, politics, and pastoral guidance.

Dąbrowski had an odd and complicated view of personality; he believed the average person has a group defined individuality, but not a unique personality. Personality represents one's deep essence (one's true, higher self), and reflects the highest level of development — however, personality is a rare achievement. Personality is defined as a self-aware, self-conscious, self-chosen, autonomous, authentic, and self-confirmed unity of mental qualities. The self is positive, other-oriented, and selfless (the ego is defeated). Here, we see empathy, humility, responsibility, self-education, self-assessment, and self-control.

Dąbrowski did not define mental health by the presence or absence of symptoms. Mental health reflects people as they “ought to be,” not as they are. It is defined by ideal, desirable, and authentic qualities.

Dąbrowski saw depression, self-doubt and anxieties as critical parts of growth. Conflicts may lead to emotional, philosophical and existential crises. Crises challenge us to review our life and create opportunities to reorder our priorities, to inhibit or drop some things, and enhance or add other things.

Dąbrowski said we should look at our emotions and differentiate lower from higher emotions. Awareness of our higher emotions allows them to direct us toward authenticity, where intelligence serves emotions. Intellect without emotion is unbalanced development. Feelings and imagination let us see “the higher possibilities” and “what ought to be in life.” Dąbrowski saw emotions and values as synonymous and said we must carefully evaluate our emotions to create, and/or choose, our own unique hierarchy of values.

Although we have an animal heritage, we have some uniquely human instincts that qualitatively separate us from animals; e. g., the developmental instinct, the creative, and self-perfection instincts.

Dąbrowski felt that psychological variables (e.g. intellect, instinct and emotion) are best understood, and must be described, using a multi-level analysis. Many people see life only on one level. However, reality consists of lower and higher levels that differ qualitatively. When we are able to see and compare psychological variables on lower and higher levels, it often creates conflicts over which we should choose. Over time, we build a hierarchy of choices that we are comfortable with. These “multilevel” views of ourselves, and of life, help us to see, and describe, reality more deeply and accurately.

Dąbrowski carefully observed people and described five levels of psychological functions: the lowest and highest levels are integrations. An integration reflects the cohesive, interrelated processes that are the foundation of our psychological functions. These two integrations are quite different. At the lowest level, is a strong self-serving, lower, ego-based identity, focused on one's own needs and reflecting social roles and mores; this is adjustment to “life as it is.” This rigid integration curtails autonomy, but also provides strong security. At the highest level, is an integration reflecting a unique and authentic personality. It is a harmonious structure based on one's unique essence and values. Adjustment is to “life as it ought to be.”

How do we develop from the lower to the higher level? In his research, Dąbrowski saw that people achieving personality show a common path; they have many crises, often breaking apart the lower integration, thus allowing opportunities to rebuild a unique self. This process is guided by the development of one's personality ideal; a vision of one's unique self and essence — of one's best self. Once this image is seen, we can make day-to-day choices leading toward achieving our ideal.

Why is personality rare? Dąbrowski observed that people achieving personality show a group of common characteristics, linked to development, but not guaranteeing it. These “developmental potentials” consist of several psychological aspects that Dąbrowski believed are genetic. Not everyone has enough of these characteristics to reach full development. The most important of these characteristics involves nervous energy: Dąbrowski called it “overexcitability.” People with overexcitabilities often have intense experiences in life, usually creating, and/or intensifying, crises. Overexcitabilities may impact our physical energy, the five senses, our imagination, our intellectual curiosity, and our emotions — the most important type. Another key characteristic is a strong inner drive to express one's true self. Other energy factors include the mental factors that shape development by controlling behavior — what Dąbrowski called dynamisms. Instincts, drives, and intellectual processes combined with emotions are dynamisms.

Conclusion: This is a complex but satisfying theory describing psychological development through crises.

For more information see: <http://positivedisintegration.com>