How Well Do We Understand Dabrowski’s Theory?

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In this talk I wish to address four issues that have concerned me for a long time. What is Dabrowski’s theory about? Is primary integration a personality structure? How well do we respect the emotional growth in Level II? Who can tell us about Level V?

1. What is Dabrowski’s theory about? It is not easy to classify Dabrowski’s theory. In the broadest sense, it is a theory of emotional development, but also about moral development and the springs of action or motivation, and it is also a theory of inner change in the core of the self. The domain of the theory are personal intelligences, more specifically the unchartered areas of intrapersonal intelligence. The theory is about the inner life of the person and the development that takes place there but it is also about relationships with others and the relationship to the larger community. The inner self cannot be healthy without empathic connection with one’s fellow human beings and a sense of responsibility for one’s place among them.

At the core of Dabrowski’s view of emotional development is inner transformation. The aim is to live what one believes, that is, to make one’s actions agree with one’s ideals, to live according to the precepts of love, compassion, helpfulness, and effective action. We are inclined to think that it is a very rare individual who undertakes the task of profound inner growth but Sinar’s (1986) study of ordinary people on the path to self-actualization shows otherwise. She found over forty persons who, unrecognized by others, were in various stages of inner seeking. Colby and Damon (1992) studied 23 people whose lives showed evidence of high moral commitment—people who do care. Case examples of emotionally gifted people extend the range even further (Piechowski, 1997, 2002).

When Dabrowski first formulated his theory he stressed the distinction between unilevel and multilevel growth process. The whole thrust of his view of development was toward elucidation of the dynamics of inner growth: unilevel—with inner conflicts, poor resolution, and little if any inner transformation, in other words a process that recycles emotional problems; and multilevel—with strong inner conflicts pushing for a resolution by inner transformation from a lower to a higher level, a process of dismantling the old self and letting a new one grow.

Thus, in its initial conception, and in the character it retained throughout its later development, it is a theory of inner transformation. Whether viewed as a theory of emotional or moral development, theory of personality or a self-theory, in each case the guiding criterion is the nature of inner growth, is it unilevel or multilevel. Which brings us to Dabrowski’s concept of levels of development.
Levels are abstract categories of development, they are not real. A person’s feelings, emotions, awareness, intentionality, and will are real because they are events in the organism as part of the natural world. They all have an underlying neurological activity. But levels are simply a conception of different types of inner growth. And types are distinctions—categories or classes—which we impose on our experience in order to arrive at some organization of knowledge. The levels are not stages development through the lifespan. As types of personality development they cannot be correlated with successive ages of life. The constructs of Dabrowski’s levels are non-ontogenetic. They are a vertical structure. Each stage in the lifespan can be analyzed for the presence or absence of the type of process in Dabrowski’s sense—unilevel or multilevel, integration or disintegration. The theoretical grid looks like this. The life of a person unfolds along the horizontal axis of time. Types of personality development—Dabrowski’s five levels—are stacked up along the vertical axis.

2. Is primary integration a personality structure? To my mind, one of the five levels is highly problematic. It is Level I or primary integration. Dabrowski viewed primary integration as a rigid personality structure. The closest to this idea is the concept of authoritarian personality (Adorno et al., 1950). It began as a study of personality traits found in prejudiced, or ethnocentric individuals. They are non-reflective, egocentric and they identify only with their own group, they lack empathy, insight and self-criticism. Their thinking is stereotyped, they hold black and white conceptions of good and bad, and have a tendency toward physical aggression. They view others as objects and are manipulative and exploitative. They value status, power, and wealth (Schmidt, 1977). But the study found that prejudice and ethnocentrism are not built into people but are the result of child rearing that emphasizes obedience to authority, respect for power, and which sanctions aggression against all those who are perceived as a threat. This means that such individuals are made, not born. They are the outcome of particular socialization which fosters antagonism toward anything that is different, unfamiliar and contrary to one’s tradition.

A world which stresses competitiveness and justifies any means of gain, creates a climate in which another’s gain is one’s loss. It operates on fears of falling behind and going under. People’s lives are constricted by a climate of uncertainty of one’s survival. If people are operating at Level I it is because this is the condition of the world, not because their psyche is constituted that way. As we know the environment has the power to support or to limit the expression of a person’s developmental potential.

Hobbes and Freud have distorted our view of human nature as not being social. But we know that the design of human primates is for social interaction, from the time of birth, through the formation of an affectional bond (Bowlby, 1969; Sroufe, 1995). This is the outcome of our biological evolution. Like subhuman primates, we are social and emotional from birth. We are designed for mutual, reciprocal, and an intensely emotional relationship with parents. Attachment theory is the relativity theory of human development. Security of the attachment bond is the foundation of optimal emotional development. Disruption of this
bond, through separation or loss, creates an incredible stress in the emotional system of the child. Depending on the number and severity, repeated disruptions create an emotional cripple or an emotionally cold person. Note, too, that George Herbert Mead (1936) recognized long before Bowlby that the self is social from infancy. Therefore, we are not born in a state of primary integration, as it is sometimes erroneously stated. Our life from birth, and even before birth, is governed by a powerful emotional system. This alone makes the concept of primary integration untenable because it contradicts the idea of Level I being emotionally deficient. It is therefore nonsense to speak of the human infant as being in a state of primary integration.

Whatever takes place to create the manipulative, self-serving, and self-protecting individuals is a result of less than emotionally favorable conditions of growing up. Whatever later looks like primary integration, is a secondary development distorting the emotional development we are designed for through biological evolution. This emotional design is built into the brain to be activated in infancy. There are, of course, constitutionally defective psychopathic individuals who lack the basic inborn human response to others.

There is much aggression in our society. Men are perceived to be emotionally stunted because the only emotion they are likely to express is anger. Such men are quickly judged as being lodged in Level I. But men are raised under often strict constraints to suppress their emotions with only anger as an accepted mode of expression. Angry men are often clinically depressed. They feel emotionally isolated (Faludi, 1999; Pollack, 1998; Real, 1997). Here again we see what is readily classified as a sign of primary integration but fails to qualify as a personality trait. Rather it is the result of men's conditions of growing up, the pressure of their socialization to be strong, and free of any hint of feminine traits.

One could take those who died in the World Trade Center as a fairly good cross section of society. Raines writes in the Foreword how their vignettes show “the subtle nobility of everyday existence and the quiet beauty of the order of quotidian life.” Reading these portraits one would be at a loss to find individuals who fit the profile of primary integration (Portraits of 9/11/01). People are complex, they have many sides to them. We have different parts, which Assagioli (1965) called subpersonalities. These different parts come to life in different environments and situations. No single part is a whole person. When Allport (1937) described Dr. D. to illustrate his concept of unity of personality, he only showed Dr. D. at work and said nothing about other aspects of his life. Dr. D. was a self-centered academic who cared only about his own work but neglected the departmental library he was in charge of. Marsh & Colangelo (1983) used this as a good example of primary integration. And so it would appear, if we went along with the assumption that Dr. D. was like this in all other aspects of his life. But we don't know how he would act in crisis or how he would respond to a call for help. We only know two of his subpersonalities, one engaged in his own work and the other neglectful of one of his responsibilities. There is too much simplification in the idea that anyone can be driven at all times by only one instinct.
I think the most pernicious consequence of invoking the concept of primary integration in the sense of an emotionally deficient personality structure, is that people are judged on the basis of superficial observation of their behaviors. It is the implicit, and often explicit, condescension and condemnation which flies in the face of most elementary empathy, a failure to recognize that we really are ignorant of other people’s lives. It flies in the face of what, presumably, we would like to emulate in self-actualizing people—a basic kindness toward everyone.

3. Do we respect the emotional growth in Level II? Like Level I, unilevel growth also tends to be looked down upon with multilevel condescension. And it is equally unjustified and offensive. I should like to illustrate with examples the extraordinary growth that can take place in Level II.

Unilevel development characterizes those in whom a sense of self is undeveloped. Such individuals depend on external authority for a sense of who they are, derived from their function, domestic or other: “I’ve never had a personality. I’ve always been someone’s daughter, someone’s wife, someone’s mother” (Belenky et al., 1986, p. 82). As long as this does not change, there is no significant inner development.

A crisis erupts when the authority governing such a persons’ life is exposed as terribly wrong, willfully misleading or being exploitative and abusive. This can happen in a family, in a church, or in the whole nation as it did during the Vietnam war. Feeling betrayed by the authority people reject it because it failed them. They begin to look for self-knowledge and self-definition in people like themselves and eventually in themselves. For instance:

I can only know with my gut. I’ve got it tuned to a point where I think and feel all at the same time and I know what is right. My gut is my best friend—the one thing in the world that won’t let me down or lie to me or back away from me. (Belenky et al. 1986, p. 53)

This expresses the shift from external authority to listening to one’s own inner voice. But the voice is undeveloped, and whatever comes from the “gut” is accepted uncritically. The voice cannot be yet said to represent the true self. But the quest for self goes on:

I always thought there were rules and that if you followed the rules you’d be happy. And I never understood why I wasn’t. I’d get to thinking, gee, I’m good, I follow the rules. I do everything they tell me to, and things don’t go right for me. My life was a mess. I wrote to a priest that I was very fond of and I asked him, “What do I do to make things right?” He had no answers. This time it dawned on me that I was not going to get the answers from anybody. I would have to find them myself. [Belenky et al., p. 61]

In this very tender beginning of the quest for self the sense of self still fluctuates. The next excerpt may sound like the epitome of unilevel process and yet there is a distinct sense of a future direction (Dabrowski called it prospection). The emotional growth here deserves respect. Inner changes are as disorienting as the changes in the outer world:
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It's hard to say who I am because I don't really think more than tomorrow. In the future I'll probably have a better understanding, because now I simply don't. I think it will really be a fun thing to find out. Just do everything until I find out. [Belenky et al., p. 83]

If emotional growth leads no further than the person’s “gut feeling,” such a person is swayed by moods, opinions, or chance experiences, the “ambivalences” and “ambitendencies.” Emotional growth then stays in the unilevel range. But continued growth is definitely possible, moving toward a sense of self:

the person I see myself as is just like an infant. I see myself as beginning. Whoever I can become, that’s a wide-open possibility. [Belenky et al., p. 82].

Here is another example:

I actually think that the person I am now is only about three or four years old with all these new experiences. I always was kind of led, told what to do. Never really thought much about myself. Now I feel like I'm learning all over again. [Belenky et al., p. 82]

We have not yet mapped out the possible path of emotional growth in Level II. We are in a better situation with Level I where we can apply the findings of Kohlberg and Loevinger toward differentiation of a variety of types of moral and ego functioning (Piechowski, 2002). This kind of work has not even begun for Level II.

Possible Correspondences between Kohlberg's and Dabrowski's, and Loevinger's and Dabrowski's Levels of Development
(From Piechowski, 2002)

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Tentatively, one might view Kohlberg's stages 1–4 as encompassed by Dabrowski's Level I, stage 5 by Level II, and stage 6 by Levels III and IV (Schmick, 1977). The much discussed hypothetical stage 7 (Kohlberg, 1961) would appear to correspond to Level V, which Dabrowski elaborated in significant detail. Similarly, Loevinger's levels of ego development: levels I-2, Delta, Delta-3, 1-3, 3/4, and in part 4, correspond to Dabrowski's Level I, while 4, 4/6, and 5 to levels I-II, II, and II-III, respectively; level 6 possibly has some correspondence with Dabrowski's Level III, and that's where Loevinger's pyramid ends (Green, 1982).

4. Who can tell us about Level V? Dabrowski's references to Level V are lofty and abstract. He listed Socrates, Mahatma Gandhi, Albert Schweitzer, Father Kolbe and Janusz Korczak as “eminent men” who serve “as indicators of the direction of development” (Dabrowski, 1970). Do they represent Level V? It is hard to tell without closer examination of their lives.
Certainly they dedicated their lives to helping others, certainly they sacrificed much. Socrates, Gandhi, Kolbe and Korczak died for what they believed in. But so do terrorists. Do we know enough about these eminent men? One hears people say that Gandhi did not treat his family well, that Father Kolbe was prejudiced. And what about eminent women, Mother Teresa, Eleanor Roosevelt, Peace Pilgrim? Do we know enough about them? Even when we do, as in the case of Mother Teresa, Eleanor Roosevelt or Peace Pilgrim, there are always critics who find some fault in them. Mother Teresa could be sharp and authoritarian and when she fell ill she was treated in an expensive clinic. Eleanor Roosevelt was a do-gooder out of a sense of guilt, Peace Pilgrim was not in her right mind, and so on. I remember a colleague of mine in a workshop on Dabrowski’s theory. When discussion turned to who could be a good example of Level V, she said “even Christ had clay feet,” though she did not elaborate what she had in mind. What could be the source of wanting to find fault with an ideal? Is it the apprehension of being disappointed or is it the difficulty of relating to someone who seems so good?

My question is this, will we ever find exemplars of Level V who can satisfy the critics’ ideal standards, or do we need to understand Level V better and make allowances for the human side of persons who may serve as ideals but who, in all fairness, should not be expected to be ideal. Maslow (1970), in his detailed observation and deep human wisdom, described self-actualizing people as having imperfections: “silly, wasteful or thoughtless habits. They can be boring, stubborn, irritating. They are by no means free from rather superficial vanity, pride, partiality to their own productions, family, friends, and children. Temper outbursts are not rare.” They are capable of mistakes or of favoring certain people, a choice others often cannot understand. Self-actualizing people represent Level IV (Brennan & Piechowski, 1991). Do we expect all imperfections to completely vanish at Level V?

We could turn for help to other great spiritual traditions, Buddhism, Sufism, or Hinduism and Yoga. In his Autobiography of a Yogi, Paramahansa Yogananda (1946) describes his spiritual training and the deep wisdom and awesome powers of his guru Swami Sri Yukteswar. The goal of spiritual development is to free oneself from the limitations of bodily existence and from habits and desires that imprison the soul. Attaining such liberation would probably qualify as attaining Level V. The criterion here are two types of altered consciousness: sabikalpa samadhi and nirbikalpa samadhi. The first is attained in a breathless state when the body is motionless and consciousness is withdrawn into cosmic consciousness. The second is an even deeper state which can be maintained while functioning normally in the world. As impossible for us it is to imagine attaining nirbikalpa samadhi, Sri Yukteswar insisted that it is a condition of even higher spiritual development which takes place in loftier dimensions. Thus Level V is not the pinnacle of development and those who attain it can hardly be expected to be flawlessly perfect.

The characteristics of Level V and the goal of development in these spiritual traditions have much in common: compassion, understanding, noncondemning of others, mastery over oneself, elimination of bad habits, strong will and mental concentration, evenmindedness, a
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spirit of joy, and so on. Keeping this in mind, together with characteristics of Level V as laid out by Dabrowski, when I encountered the recorded talks and videos of Peace Pilgrim, I was immediately persuaded that she indeed represents Level V of development because there is every indication of her being immersed in cosmic consciousness. She gives us ample insight into the inner dynamics and emotions of this high level (Piechowski, 1992; 1993). And she said—and drew in the graph of her development—that even after attaining inner peace for good, the person keeps growing. But to some hasty to judge critics she does not meet their idea of that level of development. The only problem is that I have not yet seen a case study of an alternative “better” exemplar. Until such a time I stand by Peace Pilgrim. Yet I am rather unconcerned that the testimony of her life could be in any way undermined, even though she said, “my friends thought I was off my beam!”

References


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