

A view of Dabrowsky's theory from the standpoint of research on individual differences

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The British philosopher John Searle points out the distinction between brute facts and institutional facts. Institutional facts are more theory-laden than brute facts. Agreement on brute facts is easy to come by, whereas agreement on institutional facts depends on observers' sharing assumptions and definitions (i.e., it's more crucial that observers be members of the same thought-community; Fleck, 1935/1979). An "invisible college" is made visible by today's gathering of Dabrowskians, for example, who share appreciation of the man, knowledge of his aims and outlook, familiarity with the concept of positive disintegration, and so on. These similarities define a thought-community.

Presenting a dynamic theory of selfhood, Dabrowsky paid no attention to studies of individual differences. Danziger has noted that these are two separate endeavors: "If the subject is an individual consciousness, we get a very different kind of psychology than if the subject is a population of organisms" (1990, p. 88). They yield two sets of institutional facts. So what I have to say may seem inappropriate or beside the point, or even unfair in that it regards Dabrowsky's ideas from a vantage point quite different from his own. But if he is to enter the pantheon of scholars who demand to be reckoned with, his theory has got to be acknowledged, and to some extent accepted, by a wider audience -- one that consists mostly of social scientists for whom statements about samples and populations are persuasive evidence.

From Dabrowsky's several assertions about mental health and positive disintegration, I have chosen three to examine in the light of personality research findings since the time of his writing. Of the three, one fares poorly against the empirical record, one receives strong support, and one appears to be truer for women than for men. The studies I cite were not designed to test Dabrowsky's theory, but I believe their results can and should be brought to bear in assessing its truth value. The findings I cite are convincing to me; and some of them have been cross-validated.

1. "*Mens sana in corpora sano* cannot be taken seriously" (Dabrowsky, 1964, p. 110). Here Dabrowsky argued that there is little or no relationship between physical health and mental health; pointing to John Keats as an example, he suggested that physical weakness may sometimes be conducive to positive disintegration. Even as Dabrowsky wrote, Maslow (1954; 1964) was advancing a theory of motivational priorities that said just the opposite, and French (1964) was advocating a 21-item list of characteristics of gifted children, headed by "1. Superior physique as demonstrated by above-average height, weight, coordination, endurance, and general health."

Significant links have been found between personality and physical fitness (J. Hogan, 1989) and between personality and longevity (Friedman, Tucker, Tomlinson-Keasey, Schwartz, Wingard, & Criqui, 1993). Self-discipline, conscientiousness, and constraint are directly associated with health and longevity. There are two plausible reasons for this. First, these traits tend to foster a task-oriented approach to life which by itself can help people to steer clear of potentially harmful habits and adventures. Second, such traits are conducive to absorption in work. "To be in flow is to be un-self-consciously absorbed" (Myers & Diener, 1995, p. 15). The components of flow, as elaborated by Csikszentmihalyi (1990), seem to be components of positive disintegration as well; they include loss of self-consciousness (pp. 62-66), unself-conscious self-assurance (pp. 203-204), focussing attention on the world (pp. 204-207), and being immersed in the activity (pp. 210-211).

Wild, Kuiken, and Schopflocher (1995) offer a potentially useful distinction between cognitive and motivational aspects of absorption. Although the literature on health, physical fitness, and longevity seems to refer primarily to the motivational aspect and thus to support Maslow's idea of a nested hierarchy of motives, it is plausible to regard this literature as compatible with the cognitive aspect as well. Illness and infirmity draw our attention to ourselves, not to others, not to our endeavors or the world out there. Illness tends to make us self-consciously absorbed. Consequently the weight of evidence on this issue is very much against Dabrowsky's claim. John Keats, whose astonishing creativity ended with his death from tuberculosis at the age of 26, was a rare individual as well as a rare exception to the rule.

2. Lasting emotional bonds of love and friendship are a necessary condition for positive disintegration (Dabrowsky, 1967, p. 38). Defined more broadly as a need for social relatedness, or belongingness, or the need to be a member of a group, such bonds are emphasized in several theories. Humanistic psychologists, Maslow and Rogers for example, lay emphasis on these bonds as prerequisites to self-actualization, whereas socioanalytic theorists (R. Hogan, 1983; R. Hogan, Jones, & Cheek, 1985) regard them as essential for minimally adequate adjustment. The empirical evidence, nicely summarized in recent review by Baumeister and Leary (1995), is compatible with these positions as well as with Dabrowsky's.

3. In his 1967 book, Dabrowsky emphasized the importance of knowing oneself. His discussion implies that self-awareness is a necessary condition for knowing others (p. 15) and for positive disintegration (pp. 40-41), and that this is so for everyone. I think there is enough evidence in the sex differences literature now to raise a question about whether it's so for everyone. With regard to attractiveness, for example, women describe themselves more accurately than men do (Diener, Wolsic, & Fujita, 1995); women's self-ratings are both less susceptible to positive illusions than men's are (Gabriel, Critelli, & Ee, 1994) and less contaminated by impression management and self-deception than men's are (Longo & Ashmore, 1995). Affect complexity, a variable probably associated with self-awareness, was found in one study (Cutler & Larson, 1992) to be unrelated to women's well-being, whereas for men it correlated significantly

negatively with well-being. In other words, being in touch with one's own emotions may pose a threat to men's adjustment, though not to women's.

If Dabrowsky was right about the primacy of self-awareness with respect to knowing others and to positive disintegration, we can begin to conclude that these domains are women's territory more than men's simply because women exhibit higher levels of realistic self-awareness. A large amount of evidence attests to female superiority in nonverbal communication (especially decoding; Hall, 1984; Searcy & Brenowitz, 1988), and a study by Bernieri, Zuckerman, Koestner, & Rosenthal (1994) shows clearly that women know one another, at least, better than men do. Findings from Stein, Newcomb, and Bentler's (1992) longitudinal study suggest that motivation as well as interpersonal skills contribute to these differences: opportunities to participate in the exchange of social support are an important aspect of women's career aspirations, but not of men's; and realization of such opportunities contributes significantly to women's, but not to men's, subsequent self-esteem.

With regard to positive disintegration and related states, women and men do not seem to differ. Students of flow, self-actualization, absorption, creative performance and the like rarely comment on sex differences — which suggests that there are none. Ego resilience, operationalized by a face valid self-report inventory (14 items; Block & Kremen, 1996) and purified by partialling out IQ from its correlations with California Q-set ratings (averaged across 6 trained observers), yields different patterns of r s for women and men. The sexes differ significantly on 22 of the 100 Q-set items, as compared to 5 of 100 items (exactly chance) when IQ purified by partialling out ego-resilience is correlated with Q-set ratings. The largest r s for women appear for the Q-items "is an interesting, arresting person" and "is skilled in social techniques of imaginative play" whereas the largest r s for men appear for the Q-items "is a genuinely dependable and responsible person," "is protective of those close to him," and "behaves in a sympathetic or considerate manner." The largest difference between women and men shows up on the item "values own independence and autonomy," where the women's r is .32 and the men's r is -.38. Thus ego-resilience is not the same for the two sexes, and the pattern of differences is an interesting one. Yet Block and Kremen's data need to be taken with a grain of salt, partly because their n s are small (49 women, 46 men), but more importantly because there's no compelling reason to think their construct of ego-resilience is in fact associated with creativity or the capacity to experience positive disintegration.

Conclusion

The three assertions considered here are admittedly a small and biased sample of Dabrowsky's teachings. And the first two are perhaps trivial — comments made in passing, not assumptions that are crucial to his theory. But the third is a cornerstone of his theory, and research results to date indicate that its truth value, while high for females, is very low for males. In retrospect, Dabrowsky — however inadvertently — seems to have written a psychology of women.

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