

The Roots of Dabrowski's Theory

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ABSTRACT: Dabrowski's theory emerged from the neurology and clinical experience of the late 19th and early 20th century. Dabrowski addressed the problem of the tension of unbearably intense experience that can only be resolved through self-mutilation, suicide, or inner transformation. He identified the potential for advanced development in the qualities of heightened experiencing (overexcitabilities) and in the "own forces" of autonomous self-determination.

In discussions of his theory, Dabrowski often mentioned Pierre Janet, Jan Mazurkiewicz, John Hughlings Jackson, Constantin von Monakow, and most often Søren Kierkegaard. Pierre Janet (1859-1947) is best known for his study of psychoneuroses. Constantin von Monakow (1853-1930) was Janet's contemporary, as was Sigmund Freud (1856-1937). Jan Mazurkiewicz (1871-1947) was Janet's student in Paris and Dabrowski's professor in Warsaw.

Unlike other personality theories, Dabrowski's theoretical effort was grounded in neurology. For his clinical diagnosis, Dabrowski relied on a classic neurological exam. The neurology he learned as a student in the 1920s reached back to the discoveries and ideas of the previous century. Darwinian evolution was very much on people's mind so it was only natural to contemplate the evolution of the nervous system in step with human evolution. Integration and disintegration were part of the neurological terminology of the time.

According to the prominent British neurologist John Hughlings Jackson (1835-1911) the nervous system evolved progressively higher levels of organization. The lower levels were older while the higher ones appeared only recently. In his view, the evolutionary trends proceeded from (a) simple to complex levels of organization, (b) from automatic to autonomous functions, and (c) from highly organized to less organized, fluid operation (Jackson, 1884). The capacity for autonomous thought and voluntary action emerged with the higher levels. Impairment caused by mental illness, injury, or alcohol can "dissolve" the operation of the top level. The result is a release of the more automatic operation of the level below. The overall idea appealed

to Dabrowski, but he was quick to point out that if the higher autonomous levels were less organized they would not be able to subordinate the lower ones. How important Jackson's ideas were to Dabrowski is evident by his paper "Remarks on Jackson's theory" (as cited in Dabrowski, 1996). Therefore, the higher levels must have a strong and efficient organization. The lowest level would be that of automatic and instinctual behavior.

Instincts, according to Monakow, the Russian, then Swiss, neurologist—one could also say an idealist unaffected by the Freudian dark side of the human psyche—were the building blocks of the human psyche. He distinguished between low and high levels of instincts, the latter being typically human. For instance, some actions that serve self-preservation may cause harm. The possible harm has to be weighed against what might be gained. Useful actions are sorted out from harmful ones by a process of appraisal (Monakow & Mourgue, 1928). Here comes the interesting part: appraisal introduces value, which means that some actions are better (positive value) while others are worse (negative value). Monakow said that Freud in his theory of instincts lacked the concept of a hierarchy of values, a concept that figures prominently in Dabrowski's theory.

Monakow (1925) speculated in much detail how the instinct of self-preservation evolved to caring for the preservation of the race. If eroticism is the basic instinct, then education and care for posterity are its more evolved form. (This may sound like Freudian sublimation, but isn't, because sublimation is a defense mechanism against the power of the basic instinct. Today we know that animals are capable of more than instinctual behavior as they can deceive intentionally, cheat, but also be empathic and altruistic.) The struggle for preservation of the community evolved to consideration for the individual in the community; by creation of ethical values the community affirms the value of the individual. Finally, preservation of humankind together with the cultivation of relations to the Highest evolved altruism, "striving toward the good and the true, [an] impulse toward ethical perfection and purity." These ideas illustrate the *Zeitgeist* in which Dabrowski's mind was churning.

The Evolutionary Perspective

Pierre Janet also adopted the evolutionary perspective as one of his works bears the title *L'évolution psychologiques de la personnalité* (Janet, 1929). He emphasized detailed observation so that precise description of psychological processes could be made. To outline the psychological evolution of personality, Janet drew not only from the work of French psychologists and psychiatrists, but also from the research of William James, J. H. Jackson, C. S. Sherrington, and

J. M. Baldwin. Janet was systematically building a normal psychology, and he called it *analyse psychologique*, later reproaching Freud for having used the term as psychoanalysis together with other concepts such as *système psychologiques* as complexes, *désinfection morale* as catharsis, “restriction of the field of consciousness” as repression, and so on (Sjövall, 1967). According to Henri Ellenberger (1970), Janet was first to discover cathartic therapy. While Freud interested himself with the forces of the unconscious, Janet tended to emphasize the higher levels in the personality and striving toward a richer synthesis. If psychoanalysis is depth psychology then Janet's is height psychology (Sjövall, 1967).

Janet's theory lacked the drama, symbolism, and mythology of Freud's theory—one could say it did not make a good story; it also lacked a name—a major handicap—though as a much broader conception it was more comprehensive (Barraud, 1971). Studying Janet's major works and attending his lectures in Paris affected Dabrowski deeply.

Janet's psychology is about the normal individual as a whole organism, while Freud reduced everything to a system of pressures, defenses, and releases. Consequently, no individuality can be drawn from Freud's theory, which may be a major reason for its lack of appeal to Dabrowski. While Freud interested himself in the forces of the unconscious, Janet tended rather to stress the higher levels in personality and the striving toward a richer synthesis (Sjövall, 1967).

Janet's normal individual was not the statistical mean of Quetelet's *l'homme moyen* but a healthy well-functioning organism. Janet analyzed behavior in terms of balance between resources and expenditures of personal energy (Janet, 1925). Most of our energy, he said, is tied up in social life—it is high maintenance as we would say today. Depleting one's resources (one's coping energy) leads to mental breakdown. To regain mental health, the energy has to be replenished. Healthy development tends toward unity of personality. Janet reflected in detail on physical personality (posture, gestures, walk, vocal expression), social personality, and on how personality changes over time. He considered feelings to be regulators of action (Sjövall, 1967). Fully developed self-aware individuality was, in his view, expressed not only in responsibility for one's actions but also in opposing society when society is wrong. The latter idea can be recognized in Dabrowski's dynamism of positive maladjustment. Janet outlined no less than nine levels in the evolution of behavior (Janet, 1929; Sjövall, 1967).

In Janet's framework, higher levels of psychological functioning require higher psychological tension. An action taking place high in the hierarchy of behavior demands a high degree of tension. Attention and will, being of high tension, concentrate energy. Janet often recommended work and exerting oneself as a way of raising the tension that

had fallen too far down in neuroses and psychoneuroses (Sjövall, 1967).

Dabrowski's concept of psychological tension is different from Janet's because it grew out of his study of suicide and self-mutilation. No less significant was Dabrowski's attraction to artists, musicians, and writers who lived with greater intensity at a higher pitch of emotions. He perceived a connection between emotional tension and intensity of experience that led him to identify five ways of processing tension—the five overexcitabilities. This idea emerged from his study of self-mutilation, in which he included not only harming oneself to appease inner tension, but also emotional tormenting oneself through self-recrimination and self-loathing that included feelings of guilt, though no guilt-worthy acts were committed (one can think of survivor guilt as an example, or feeling guilty for being affluent amidst poverty).

Another of Janet's concepts is "prise de conscience de soi-même" (becoming self-aware), which he regarded as a law of mental development. To be conscious of something is to first feel it and then to be able to put into words (for example, I am scrupulous, I am obsessed by regrets, I have broken a taboo and lived). When it becomes a crisis, a transformation takes place in one's beliefs (Janet, 1929). Dabrowski often referred to this concept: "It is an act of illumination, as it were, an act of a sudden understanding of the sense, the causes, and purposes of one's own behavior. As a consequence of repeated acts of *prise de conscience de soi-même* arises the 'subject-object' dynamism" (Dabrowski, 1967, p. 104). This dynamism prepares the work of inner transformation.

Dabrowski valued the work of Charles S. Sherrington (1941, 1947) as being particularly close to the theory of positive disintegration. Mental activity and the rich life of the human psyche cannot be reduced to the electrical activity of the brain. The human mind having at its center the conscious 'I' is in conflict with nature, because in the natural world life devours life, causing endless suffering. While nature has no ethics, human beings do and are capable of valuing each individual life and condemning infliction of suffering. "Where there is a mind, there is suffering, and the higher the life, the more suffering, which leads to the question of values" (Dabrowski, 1964, pp. 178–179).

Sherrington emphasized that stopping an action is also acting. Thus, inhibition is as significant as stimulation, self-control as significant as the impulse to act. We know that Dabrowski valued highly the prevalence of inhibition over impulse to action in the introvert. Inner reflection and self-evaluation are the prerequisites of multilevel development.

While Janet's ideas were encountering opposition to be followed by oblivion that lasted decades—his death in 1947 went unnoticed in France (Ellenberger, 1970)—they found a continuation in the work of

his student, Jan Mazurkiewicz, “the father of Polish scientific psychiatry,” who was also a Freemason (Kaczyński, 1975; Kokoszka, 2007). Janet's oblivion is perhaps understandable in light of the hegemony of psychoanalytic theory in the early part of the 20th century and the fact that English-speaking psychologists rarely read French (and Polish not in a million years).

Mazurkiewicz taught that the nervous system has a dual function: one is physical (to transmit electrical impulses) and one is experiential. Experiencing, of course, combines feeling, cognizing, and acting. Each subjective experience takes shape within the multilevel organization of the nervous system (Kokoszka, 2007). At the higher levels, and especially in the cortex, the processes become autonomous and can be self-generated. The fact that we are capable of voluntary actions demonstrates that we can act in an autonomous manner.

Dabrowski named the “own forces” of the psyche the “third factor,” next to the social milieu (second factor), and one's constitution (first factor), as the shapers of personality development. Dabrowski gave the third factor also a specific meaning as a dynamism that acts selectively on the propensities moving within the inner psychic milieu. The individual becomes aware of that which is essential and lasting in one's self in contrast to that which is secondary and transitory. This selective sorting out leads also to the scrutiny of one's environment in regard to the values that operate in it (Dabrowski, 1964).

Feelings are the central element of Mazurkiewicz's theory. No learning can be remembered without the dynamic component of feeling that was first associated with it. Echoing Monakow, he wrote that “feeling is always a subjective appraisal of a value of an experienced content (a sensory impression, an organismic sensation, a thought process), it is an emotionally felt response to that experience” (Mazurkiewicz, 1930, p. 36).

Feelings can play a directive role. In Mazurkiewicz's view, feelings associated with the evolutionary higher levels are stronger than the lower ones because the speed of reactions is higher in the cortical areas than in the subcortical ones. And people are distinctly capable of behaving according to higher feelings on the one hand and on the other hand of suppressing instinctual tendencies (Kokoszka, 2007).

Positive Disintegration

Dabrowski did his doctoral dissertation on the psychology of suicide at the University of Geneva and published it with his name phoneticized to Dombrowski (1929). It is an extremely detailed systematic review of all the possible conditions leading to suicide, including suicide by couples and by children. Dabrowski also draws attention to cases in which there is a conflict between the individual

and social life, “between his affective tendencies and a critical stance toward others, between an ideal, that sometimes even the subject himself recognizes as unreal, and the world of reality” (p. 87). He also discusses cases when strong imagination and a series of disappointments may lead some individuals to a deeply pessimistic outlook on life. He speaks of a “thirst for the absolute, the unshakeableness of emotions, the firmness of values” that exert a decisive influence on how a person who is “hypersensitive, hyperindividualistic, and overexcitable” views life (p. 64). Later he will describe these things as *inner conflict* and *positive maladjustment*.

The theory of positive disintegration is foreshadowed in Dabrowski’s 1937 monograph “The psychological bases of self-mutilation” and in the 1938 paper on the types of increased psychic excitability (Dabrowski, 1937, 1938). In that paper only four types of overexcitability are presented: psychomotor, emotional, imaginal, and sensual; the intellectual was not included.

The subject of the monograph is the problem of the tension of unbearably intense experience that must be resolved. The solution is found by fighting pain with pain, by harming oneself physically. Physical self-mutilation and also mental self-torture release the tension. Dabrowski reviews a number of cases, but especially the lives of Michelangelo, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Otto Weininger (suicide at 23), Jan Władysław Dawid (wife’s suicide), and Lev Tolstoy, to describe struggles of conflicting tendencies within the self, for instance, longing for simple life opposed by life of privilege, the wish to be humble clashing with one’s pride, sensuality obstructing the goal of spiritual perfection. The more the opposing tendencies approach equal strength, the higher the inner tension. Tension abates when one side gains ascendance.

J. W. Dawid (1859–1914) occupies a special position here as one in whom inner transformation was of the most thorough kind. He was a cool intellectual, a psychologist devoted to education. The UNESCO International Bureau of Education includes him as one of the 100 most important educators. He was a researcher of the positivist school for which only what could be measured is real. Historically for Poles under the tsar the times were difficult and they took their toll on his wife. Dawid loved his wife deeply. When she committed suicide, losing her was too much to bear. He was tortured by a feeling of guilt that he was unable to prevent her death. In the years of emotional crisis that followed, Dawid eventually opened his mind to transcendental reality. In his letters and diaries of that time, Dabrowski found expressions of Dawid’s strong desire for self-sacrifice, for a partial death that would open the door to spiritual development and the possibility of being reunited with his beloved Jadwiga.

In concluding thoughts to his monograph, Dabrowski uses expressions like “stabilization of personality at a higher level,” the value of self-sacrifice, the “purifying value of suffering”

(when properly understood as a voluntary path of spiritual growth), and “higher type of personality” that indicate the emerging paradigm of a higher level opposing the lower one and rejecting it, the “what ought to be” opposing and disintegrating the “what is.” These kinds of struggles within the individual's inner psychic milieu will later be called *unilevel*, when no hierarchy of values is present and *multilevel* when one is.

In 1937 Dabrowski still admitted to mental overexcitability as pathological, by which he seemed to mean a generally anxious and agitated state of mind. Nevertheless at the end of the monograph he asserts that this view may be erroneous. The phrase “the unpleasant state of mental overexcitability” appears a number of times as the goal to alleviate it by self-infliction of pain or in other ways. He suggested methods for “early prevention of overexcitability and of tendencies to aggression and explosiveness” (p. 97). I believe he meant that it is necessary for highly excitable children to develop a degree of understanding and self-control in order to prevent the agony of out of control intensities. In his first outline of development through positive disintegration, which appeared in French in 1959, overexcitability does not even have a section. Under the communist regime, publication of the book *On Positive Disintegration* was delayed until 1964. As a component of developmental potential, overexcitability does not appear until 1970 in *Mental Growth through Positive Disintegration*. Also, not until that time, did Dabrowski have all the moving and transforming forces of personal growth (the dynamisms) in place (Piechowski, 2008).

In building his theory, Dabrowski always stayed close to the neurological basis of felt experience. The nervous system not only transmits excitation but also its opposite, which is inhibition. The intensity as well as the nuance of feeling and experience varies from individual to individual. The spectrum of human beings “larger than life” who live their life full tilt extends all the way to the timid and inhibited whose lives are constricted. The nervous system processes tension in various ways as different modes of processing experience—the overexcitabilities. Tension can be expressed directly through the emotions or be channeled into agitation of thought, endless imaginings of happy outcomes or disaster scenarios, sensual release or intensified physical activity; it can be restless, concentrated or aggressive.

Dabrowski incorporated the concept of higher emotions as that which guides multilevel development: “feelings and emotions constitute the deepest essence of the psyche” (Dabrowski, 1964, p. 193). In 1969 breakthrough research showed that rather than being culturally determined, emotions are universal (Ekman, Sorenson, & Friesen, 1969). It took about 20 years for mainstream psychology to rediscover emotions, even though their importance had been made plain by Charles Darwin (1872) and William James (1890). Today we know that cognition cut off from feeling becomes ineffectual (Damasio,

1994). Dabrowski's theory is surprisingly consistent with current views of the role of emotions in personality development (Battaglia, Mendaglio, & Piechowski, 2014). Consequently, the blossoming of high intelligence takes place in the matrix of the emotional dynamics of interest, passion, engagement, persistence, coping with failure, and most fundamentally primary relationships and development of self-control (Gopnik, 2009; Moffitt et al., 2011).

A Multilevel Approach to Personality Development

Theories of personality grew out of the need to make sense of mental illness. Neurologists look for impairment in the nervous system, psychiatrists and psychologists for impairment of social functioning, reality functioning, emotional response, and sense of self. The obvious goal is to restore people to their original level of functioning.

Because of the presence of debilitating distress and anxiety, psychoneuroses were always viewed as mental illness. To Janet psychoneurosis was an arrest in development of the affected function, a weakness in the nervous system, and a prelude to a more severe mental illness. Even C. G. Jung viewed psychoneurosis as an unsuccessful attempt at resolving the basic questions of human life. Rather than mental illness, Dabrowski asserted that psychoneurosis is in fact the inevitable process of emotional growth and personality development (Dabrowski, 1972). His basic argument was that rather than being negative, psychoneurotic symptoms signal changes that are under way in the process of emotional development, the beginning of inner life.

Like Kierkegaard, Dabrowski felt that externally oriented people—those who thoughtlessly adapt to social conventions—have no inner life. Inner processes appeared to him as a drama on the stage of a person's psyche. He called it *inner psychic milieu* in analogy to Claude Bernard's inner physiological milieu that balances dynamic processes inside the organism. Most likely, this was the starting point for Dabrowski of his conception of levels and the *multilevel* approach to analyzing behaviors and inner experience.

The world of external and internal phenomena began to form itself in my experience as a world of values arranged in a hierarchy of levels. Values appeared to represent different levels. The span between the levels of a given phenomenon became by far more significant than the content of the term defining the phenomenon. Each level covered a distinctly different range of a given phenomenon. Thus empathy appeared as something different from primitive sympathy, primitive immobilizing fear as something totally different

from and unrelated to existential fear, brutal and wild laughter as something different from and unrelated to a subtle smile manifesting depth of inner experience. It was striking that these disparate manifestations of behavior never coexisted in the same individual. Existential fears, obsessions, and depressions turned out to be unrelated to egocentric fears, obsessions and depressions. The first were the result of excessive sensitivity, disappointments, sadness, and suffering; the second were most often the result of lack of success in life, thwarted ambition, material losses—in short, of primitive egocentrism shaped by external stimuli.

In numerous mental disorders, and especially in psychoneuroses, I found again and again great creative and developmental richness. Such patients, not reconciled to their concrete reality but rather opposed to it, were undergoing psychoneurotic processes generated by the multidimensionality of their experiencing. They manifested trends and efforts in search of a reality of a higher level. And often they were able to find it unaided. (Dabrowski, 1975, pp. 235–236)

In this manner Dabrowski contrasts the narrowness of focus on ordinary reality with the breadth of creative richness and depth of vision, but also torment of those who see and feel far beyond the mundane. Consequently, psychoneurosis is not a mental illness but a process of positive disintegration driven by the tension between the higher and the lower in oneself, a journey to selfhood from the “what is” to the “what ought to be”—the level of higher values and of an inner ideal that becomes a guiding force.

Because the process takes the person by surprise, he called it *spontaneous*, and because of the vertical tension, he called it *multilevel*, and because it shakes up the psyche, a *disintegration*. It is a process of inner transformation that may be very difficult. The suffering is no doubt greatest for those who find it hard to advance, and also when they are all alone without even a written word to guide them, a description that would fit their experience. The lives of Eleanor Roosevelt, Etty Hillesum, the mystics, and the cases Dabrowski collected, illustrate the process vividly (Mróz, 2009; Nixon, 1989, 1990, 1994, 2010; Piechowski, 1990, 1992, 2008). The theory is a powerful tool enabling one to assist gifted adolescents or adults according to the nature of their growth process (Dabrowski, 1972; Jackson & Moyle, 2009a and b; Jackson, Moyle, & Piechowski, 2009; Silverman, 1993).

Essential to multilevel development is the inner core of “own forces.” When that inner core is lacking, the capacity for inner transformation is also lacking. Without the capacity for inner transformation, a shakeup of the psyche results in *unilevel disintegration*. The tensions and conflicts are played out as if on one plane and may result in severe

mental illness. The next level down is the lowest level that characterizes either people struggling just to survive, or authoritarian and manipulative exploiters of others. Infelicitously, Dabrowski called it *primary integration*. On closer analysis it is neither primary nor an integration (Piechowski, 2014).

Dabrowski's levels do not describe a sequential unfolding. Primary integration (level I) is not a starting point for development. Its breakdown may lead to unilevel disintegration but no further. Unilevel disintegration (level II) cannot become multilevel unless the multilevel "own forces" are present. A flatland does not become a mountain unless there is a force to push it upward. Only with the emergence of an inner psychic milieu and the transformative dynamisms of level III (such as dissatisfaction with oneself, inferiority toward oneself, dis-identification from what is felt to be lower in oneself), the process may continue to the next level (IV) when persons become more in charge of their inner growth as an *organized multilevel disintegration*. Finally, full selfhood is achieved in *secondary integration* (level V). Level V represents both a life of inner peace and a high level of energy to serve, as exemplified in the lives of Mahatma Gandhi, Pope John XXIII, the Dalai Lama, Bishop Tutu, Mother Teresa, or Peace Pilgrim. A few case examples of this lofty plane have been examined in detail (Nixon, 1995, 2010; Piechowski, 2009).

Unlike J. H. Jackson's view that the highest levels of the nervous system are the most vulnerable, Dabrowski discovered that with advancing development the higher dynamisms become stronger, the automatisms of lower levels weaken, disappear and autonomous forces gain full control. The Kierkegaardian goal of fully autonomous individuality is close to being achieved.

Although the autonomous component of "own forces" is an essential part of *developmental potential*, it has received less attention than the qualities of intense experiencing—the five overexcitabilities. Higher level of energy, sensory richness and sensitivity, creative imagination, emotional intensity, depth and sensitivity, persistent problem-solving, and especially the flair for identifying novel problems, add up to a heightened intensity of experiencing that is often not well tolerated, or worse, pathologized as something to be fixed. These qualities, readily recognized in the gifted and talented, have been embraced by parents, counselors, and the gifted themselves as being true of them.

Individuality Emerges from Properties of the Organism

This brief glimpse into the past shows that the theory of evolution inspired thinking about the development of society and of the

individual as a progression from lower, instinctual and automatic behavior, to a higher social intercourse represented by cooperative, ethical, and altruistic behavior. However, the somewhat abstract and speculative theorizing took a more specific form in Dabrowski's theory.

Psychology abounds in general theories. In the canon of personality theories, few address individual differences. Analysis of the conceptual structure of theories of personality (that psychotherapies are based on) revealed that rare is a theory that offers well defined concepts, that is, concepts with enough specificity to provide means of measuring them (Piechowski, 1975).

An individual human being is an organism. An organism has distinct properties that can be observed and measured to reveal individual differences. They can be differences in build and physiology or in what the organism can do, for instance in the abilities to speak, sing, run, aim, or solve puzzles. Carl Gustav Jung described such properties as extraversion and introversion, thinking and feeling, sensing and intuiting that via the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator remain the best guide to choices of vocation, marriage partners, or matching learning styles. I call these characteristics *properties of the organism*—they lend themselves to creating individual profiles. Dabrowski introduced levels and the five overexcitabilities that are another means of creating different kinds of individual profiles. Well-defined concepts make it possible to devise instruments that enable research (Falk & Miller, 2009).

Dabrowski's mission in developing his theory was to depathologize the characteristics of intense agonizing experience and instead to show that what used to be called psychoneurosis and thought of as mental illness is, in fact, a process of personal growth. Positive disintegration may look like an illness, and it feels like an illness to the individual suffering through it, but it is a natural process of inner transformation just like the caterpillar turning into a chrysalis that through profound inner upheavals turns into a butterfly. The positive disintegration inside the chrysalis proceeds on automatic pilot, but humans need a pilot, one that is good and wise.

NOTE. This paper is an adaptation and extension of the theory section in Chapter 14, "Kazimierz Dabrowski: A life of positive maladjustment (1902-1980)" in A. Robinson & J. Jolly (Eds.) (2014). *A century of contributions to gifted education: Illuminating lives* (pp. 181–198). New York: Routledge.

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