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TWO DEVELOPMENTAL CONCEPTS: MULTILEVELNESS AND DEVELOPMENTAL POTENTIAL

The theory of positive disintegration (Dabrowski, 1937; 1964a and b; 1967; Dabrowski, Kawczak, and Piechowski, 1970) appears to be deceptively simple. It tells us that the development of individuality occurs in successive stages, wherein each succeeding stage is higher than the previous one. "Higher" means more awareness, more mental control, more Rogerian openness to experience, more empathy, more individual responsibility. To get from one level to the next one goes through depression, anxiety, periods of confusion and hypersensitivity, and when it is over the higher level is achieved. But is it all that simple? Is it possible to grasp a comprehensive theory of human development from a one-paragraph vignette?

Concepts Cannot Be Learned from Their Definitions

On first reading the concepts of the theory of positive disintegration are not easy to grasp. It is customary to blame the author of the theory for a lack of clarity in defining his concepts. It is seldom realized, however, that conceptual thinking, in the sense of broad fundamental ideas, is much more complex than thinking in terms of

descriptive qualities, numbers, or narrowly defined operational definitions. A definition of a concept, no matter how good and precise, does not prepare one to apply the concept because the knowledge of the definition still lacks the contexts and situation which give life and meaning to that concept. For instance, knowing the definition of the gene does not tell one the concept of the gene. One has to take a course in genetics and do some experiments before the concept of the gene acquires meaning. We know a concept when we can apply it in all possible meaningful contexts. We never know a concept fully because we never exhaust all possible meaningful contexts. The concept of concept requires us to be open to new possibilities and new contexts. Clearly, *concept* is fundamentally different from *term* which only describes and names.

The common difficulty with the theory of positive disintegration, as in every other case, is in not realizing that the meaning of its concepts cannot be learned from their definitions alone. This difficulty is amplified by the fact that the theory is conceptually very rich. In consequence the theory presents an uncommon challenge.

The definition of positive disintegration is easily accepted because almost everyone finds in his own experience, or in close observation of his fellow men, phenomena which appear to answer the description. Yet the definition of positive disintegration is not the most important thing at all; in fact, it can be looked upon as a convenient term for a certain type of mental growth process or social process of change. It is true that, unlike other theories of human development, the theory of positive disintegration does not deal with specific contents of human growth such as Erikson's

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critical stages (Erikson, 1963), or Maslow's hierarchy of basic needs (Maslow, 1965), but deals directly with the nature of the developmental process. It speaks in terms of types of integration and types of disintegration while the specific content of each process is determined individually, culturally, historically, or whatever. But even in this fundamental approach it is still a description. We want an explanation. In order to propose an explanation we need a concept or concepts that would serve the role of irreducible axioms of the theory. I see two such concepts in the theory of positive disintegration: "multilevelness" and "developmental potential".

Two Illustrative Cases

In order to introduce the concept of multilevelness let us consider two cases taken from Dabrowski (1972), with some modifications.

CASE 1. Janet was 21 years old when she sought psychiatric help because of her anxieties and obsessions. She was nervous and very sensitive from childhood. At the time of her treatment she had fears of space, of riding in cars and in streetcars. She was afraid to go out in the street by herself. At night she frequently woke up with feelings of anxiety, cried and could not get back to sleep for many hours. She developed obsessions as, for example, when she kept thinking of the number eight. She could not get rid of it and the recurrence of eight in her thoughts was very disagreeable to her. When entering a store or a friend's home, afraid of someone's possible aggression, she always entered sideways.

Her fears of motor vehicles dated back to the time several years ago when she witnessed a tragic accident; the streetcar in which she was riding ran into a man and killed him. Her anxiety condition developed from the time when her father got drunk and threatened to kill himself with a razor.

CASE 2. Steve was 26 years old when he asked for psychiatric help regarding his feelings of insecurity and inability to distinguish what was sinful and what

was not. He was unusually sensitive and nervous from childhood. He had an attraction to the life of prayer and to understanding and helping others. He became a seminarian since he felt that it was his vocation to help others as a priest. For several years he had recurring doubts as to whether he thought and acted properly. He was convinced of being worth less than others. He was not able to recall positive things about himself and his actions except those that had a "shade of sin". The feeling of his sinfulness often grew out of all proportion. If he saw a poor or sick person, or if he happened to be a witness to violence and could not stop it, he then had feelings of guilt and of having failed in his duty. He was very sensitive to the feelings of people and animals. The possibility of causing sorrow to another person made him extremely uneasy. He was in perpetual doubt whether his confessions were good and he kept wondering if he did not omit something. He felt that God would judge him severely.

Comparing the two cases we note that Janet's fears remain unmodified, keep disturbing her sleep. They are invariably evoked by situations reminiscent of her original painful experiences (streetcars or her father's self-aggression). In Steve's case his fears arise in regard to his sense of self-worth. There is self-examination. His witnessing of violence or human wretchedness bring reflection and self-recrimination.

Mental processes such as reflection and self-analysis, to mention only two, control Steve's behavior. They control his experiencing of events in his everyday life while in Janet's case it is the mental functions which are under the control of outside experiences and events producing general and unmodified fears. Steve's anxiety concerns his moral values while Janet's anxiety concerns her physical survival and well-being. Steve shows strong concern with values. He judges himself to be worth less than others, thereby showing feelings of deep inferiority in regard to his sense of values. This strong concern with values is absent in Janet.

Multilevel vs. Unilevel Organization of Development

A concern with values implies, by definition, that some qualities are prized more highly than others (in Steve's case they are purity of his conscience, empathy and helpfulness) while other qualities are considered undesirable (sin, failing in his duties, causing sorrow to others). We see here the formation of a hierarchy of values: self-development and self-perfection based on such ideals as prayer and understanding of others, are his *high* values which he strives to attain; harm to others even in the slightest form and neglect of his duties, are his *low* values, which he strives to overcome. This shows that his hierarchy of values directs his development. Steve is going in the direction of his high values and away from what he considers low. In Janet's case a hierarchy of values is noticeably absent.

The mental and emotional processes in Steve's life have a *multilevel* organization. At first approximation the high levels of this internal organization are his high values and the low levels are his low values. There is a conflict between the high levels and the low levels. This multilevel organization is called the *inner psychic milieu* and the conflict within is an *inner conflict*.

In Janet's case, for a lack of recognizable levels, the inner organization is called *unilevel*. In her case a conflict may arise between divergent tendencies, for instance, her fear of attack from an unknown direction and her desire to appear composed and normal, but such conflict is unilevel because it does not involve a preference of values.

We note further that Steve shows definite concern about his individual growth while Janet does not. We see that this concern can exist only if there is a multilevel conflict. And conversely, if a multilevel conflict arises it promotes self-growth. Development from a unilevel to a multilevel inner psychic milieu depends on the emergence of conflicts of value.

The fact that we can distinguish in man's psyche between a multilevel and a unilevel organization has far-reaching consequences. We have to extend the

concept of multilevelness to intellectual, emotional and instinctive processes. We begin to study the emotions such as fear, anger, joy or empathy and we discover their different levels. A fear of failure in one's vocation is of a different level than the fear of falling ill. An anger over the immorality of war is of different level than anger over a colleague's promotion. A joy that is inspired by the idea of human brotherhood is of a different level than the joy arising from securing a promotion. Empathy that is patient and non-condemning of everyone is of a different level than the pseudo-empathy of a stag party.

We have to apply the concept of multilevelness not only to the organization of man's inner psychic milieu but also to his social environment. For instance, let us take a department of psychology. There are many staff members in a department and each contributes his particular interest and his particular research orientation. Freedom of research and respect for personal preferences is guaranteed if professionally all members treat each other as equals. If this equality is based on the belief that there is no way of telling what approach and what research strategies are more valuable than others then we can label — for the purpose of our discussion — the state of such a department as unilevel. If, however, the mutual interactions and contributions of the different department members are inspired by the need to find the most meaningful approach to the most fundamental questions of human psychology, then we can label the state of such a department as multilevel. Here valuation becomes the moving force of research while in the other case no valuation is involved and meaningful research is considered on equal basis with meaningless research.

But how are we to decide objectively what is to be labeled a high level of a given function, or social organization, and what is to be labeled its low level? On what basis can we accept the superiority of a multilevel organization over a unilevel one? Why should a choice of values be superior to an all-equalizing valuelessness?

Criteria Differentiating Higher and Lower Levels

In a hierarchy, by definition, the levels that control other levels are considered to be higher. In a living cell the nucleus controls the functions of the cell, therefore, the nucleus occupies a higher level in the biological organization than the cytoplasm.

The higher levels of a hierarchy cannot be deduced from its lower levels. For instance, the genetic information contained in the DNA cannot be deduced from the physico-chemical properties of the DNA, or from its composition, or even from the sequence of its components. We can only arrive at it from the knowledge of its product, a protein. This line of thinking has been developed by Polanyi (1968) and given support by Johnson (1970) by an argument involving information theory and the second law of thermodynamics. Information and order within a system are synonymous.

Johnson points out that the organization of a biological system can be described in terms of its information content, but that this is not very helpful. One has to sort out information necessary to maintain and reproduce the system because all other information, i.e. the position and movement of each molecule, can be derived from the primary information. This, he says, is something new to the physico-chemical realm because it introduces a criterion of the *quality* of information: "In biology some information is more important than other information." Information theory deals only with the quantity of information and therefore, the application of information theory to biological systems in order to produce fruitful results must take into account the quality of information.

If we now transpose this argument to the distinction of levels of development, whether biological or psychological, we may say that each level of organization has information of different quality. This information, which is nothing else but the order within the system, cannot be interchanged between levels, which means that one level cannot be derived from the other. Putting it another way:

each level is a Gestalt recognizable only as a whole and it cannot be reduced to a lower level. An organization such as a multilevel inner psychic milieu cannot be derived from a unilevel organization nor can it be reduced to it for explanation.

Higher levels exercise control over lower levels. They have different types of organization, or structure. We have discussed a unilevel and a multilevel structure. The elements of this structure are called dynamisms. These are cognitive and emotional processes which shape individual development. For instance, dissatisfaction with oneself, disquietude toward oneself, and the feeling of guilt, are strongly charged emotional forces. Dissatisfaction, disquietude and guilt express the recognition that the present state of one's inner psychic milieu is undesirable. They also direct the individual to move away from what he feels to be undesirable. For this reason this type of strong feelings is conceptualized by Dabrowski as dynamisms — dynamic forces of developmental change. They are multilevel because they express a split within one's personality structure between "what is" and "what ought to be".

A unilevel inner psychic milieu has unilevel dynamisms. Janet (Case 1) was buffeted by conflicts between divergent impulses. Such divergence of actions over which one has little control is called *ambitendency*. Divergence of feeling, such as changeable likes and dislikes over which one has little control are called *ambivalences*. The frequent switches from one direction to another, and from one preference to another, leave one directionless. They also leave one virtually valueless because values — as dynamic agents of development — acquire meaning only in the context of a hierarchy. A unilevel organization is ahierarchical.

This type of development, called here unilevel, is amply portrayed in Warner's (1966) "Self-Realization and Self-Defeat" as self-defeat. Multilevel development is characterized by all the 14 philosophic values identified by Boy and Pine (1972), although their list in no way gives a complete picture. These values do not apply to the abstraction called Man, but

only to the man who possesses a multilevel inner psychic milieu; a man who enacts these values.

The development of inner psychic milieu from a unilevel to a multilevel structure occurs through a great deal of conflict. The emergence of a multilevel dynamism such as dissatisfaction with oneself, for instance, begins to counteract the directionless fluctuation of tendencies and feelings. In the loose matrix of a unilevel milieu the multilevel dynamisms bring to development an element of direction and organization. This is one criterion of distinguishing a higher from a lower level.

A second criterion of objectively recognizing higher from lower levels involves the sequence of development. This sequence is invariant. This is exemplified in Piaget's theory of cognitive development and in Kohlberg's theory of moral development (Kohlberg, 1963). In the context of the theory of positive disintegration it means that multilevel disintegration is preceded by unilevel disintegration but never the reverse. This developmental sequence has the same character as organic evolution where later forms of life are superior to earlier ones, e.g. mammals are superior to reptiles and fishes.

It would be erroneous to ascribe to the developmental sequence through positive disintegration the same character as the stages of the life cycle where the peak of development is followed by a decline. The stages of positive disintegration are an open rising sequence of individual evolution.

Developmental Potential

We now have to account for the fact that many individuals never go beyond the stage of unilevel disintegration and in the more severe and unfortunate cases become chronic alcoholics, chronic schizophrenics, drug addicts, etc., while others overcome these addictions or emerge from an acute schizophrenic breakdown on their own. In many individuals their personal evolution is indistinguishable from the sequence of stages of the life cycle (*normal development*) while others transcend the life cycle; their development proceeds with

higher intensity and at a greater pace (*accelerated development*) (Dabrowski, 1970). These different types and levels of development are supported by empirical evidence (Dabrowski and Piechowski, 1972).

Some highly creative individuals evolve a concern for self-perfection where the medium of creative effort is no longer clay or language but their own personality structure (e.g. Kahlil Gibran, Dag Hammarskjöld, Thomas Merton). Some individuals become conscious of their own development and become self-determining and self-directive. The concept necessary to account for these and many other related phenomena of normal, accelerated and pathological development is the concept of the *developmental potential* (Dabrowski, 1970).

The developmental potential is the original endowment which determines the character and the extent of mental growth possible for any given individual.

Development is controlled by three factors: constitution (the first factor), social influence (the second factor), and autonomous mental functions (the third factor in its wider sense) (Dabrowski, 1970). Social influences by promoting or limiting development, promote or limit the expression of the developmental potential. This implies that the degree of response to social influence is also determined by the developmental potential.

The autonomous factor is made up of those mental dynamisms of the individual which struggle for independence from social influences and from constitutional typology. The degree of autonomy of these dynamisms depends on the degree to which they are conscious. A criminal psychopath indifferent to social opinion can be said to have a developmental potential limited to the first factor only. Individuals who throughout their life remain in the grip of social opinion and their own constitutional typology (e.g. social climbers, fame seekers, those who say "I was born that way" and do not conceive of changing) can be said to have a developmental potential limited to the first two factors. In these individuals

autonomous developmental dynamisms do not appear.

Individuals who consciously struggle to overcome their social indoctrination and constitutional typology (e.g. those who attempt to overcome their excessive introversion, or those who are extremely active and extroverted and attempt to balance it by occasional withdrawal and reflection) can be said to have a developmental potential with all three factors represented.

Individuals, who having many talents become concerned with their self-growth (great saints and leaders of mankind) and whose development is characterized by great intensity and severe crises, have a developmental potential with a particularly strong autonomous component. The autonomous component is the germ for the formation of a multilevel inner psychic milieu.

The above description tells how the developmental potential is postulated but does not tell whether it can be recognized independently of the context of development.

Behavioral Components of the Developmental Potential

The constitutional traits which allow the assessment of the developmental potential, independent of the context of development, are different forms of enhanced excitability. These are: psychomotor, sensual, emotional, imaginative, and intellectual overexcitability (Dabrowski, 1970). They can be detected even in small children (Dabrowski, 1959; 1972; Briskin, 1973). How these different forms of overexcitability are manifested is described elsewhere (Piechowski, 1972).

The developmental potential is strong if all, or almost all, forms of overexcitability are present. For instance the stage of multilevel disintegration cannot be achieved without the combination of at least three or four forms of overexcitability, such as the emotional, imaginative and intellectual. If only one type of overexcitability prevails then we deal with a limited and one-sided development. For instance, an individual with only sensual overexcitability may become a hedonist

incapable of deeper and lasting interpersonal relations, while an individual with only intellectual overexcitability becomes a scholar or scientist, either limited to a narrow field or, an erudite storing vast amounts of knowledge but virtually incapable of generating original ideas.

In a recently completed study of types and levels of development (Dabrowski and Piechowski, 1972) the manifestations of the components of the developmental potential were counted in an analysis of autobiographies. It was found that the frequency of manifestation of forms of overexcitability plus the frequency of manifestation of developmental dynamisms may be used as an estimate of the developmental potential. There is a good agreement between an intuitive (clinical) and an analytical (quantitative) assessment of the developmental potential for a given subject (Piechowski, 1972b).

Five Dimensions of Mental Functioning

It should be evident from this brief presentation that the full import and meaning of the concept of developmental potential will be possible only through a more extensive study. It calls for new methods which would make the differentiation of types and levels of development possible. It calls for the differentiation of dimensions of mental functioning (Piechowski, 1972a). All this is of great significance for education and counseling because it promises to develop reliable means of matching clients, strategies and helpers; it also promises to uncover for every individual child its principal mode of responding to the world.

The five forms of overexcitability can be regarded as independent dimensions of mental functioning. An individual may be high on any one dimension, several, or none. The principal dimension determines his particular mode of responding to stimuli and interacting with the world within and without.

The psychomotor dimension is one of motor energy, agitation, need for action; the sensual dimension is one of surface interaction through sensory inputs of

pleasure and displeasure; the intellectual dimension is one of analysis, questioning and logic; the imaginal dimension is one of dreams, images, humor, plans never carried out, strong visualization of experience; the emotional dimension is one of relationships with others and with oneself, of the despair of loneliness and of the joy of love, of the enigma of existence.

These five dimensions may be likened to channels through which information is flowing. The five forms function as selective channels, or color filters, through which the stimuli from the world reach the individual. Such channels determine to what stimuli, and in what way, he is capable of responding.

Through analysis of responses received in essay form (e.g. autobiography or answers to an open-ended questionnaire) one can establish individual profiles (Piechowski, 1972b). These profiles help us understand that individuals high on distinct non-overlapping dimensions, e.g. one highly psychomotor combined with intellectual, and another highly imaginative combined with emotional, have little in common in their experience of the world, i.e. in their mode of being and acting. While the first will strive for logic, precision, strict reliance on data, great volume and pace of work, achievement and accomplishment, and will oppose any intuitive conceptions, the other will strive for the expression of feelings, for unique relationships, for the legitimacy of dreams, daydreams and poetry, and will grasp things intuitively rather than analytically; external success and achievement may mean little to him. The two will oppose each other but never will they be able to comprehend and reconcile their differences.

Viewed in this way many philosophical and clinical arguments are perceived to be a function of different dimensions of mental functioning. They are futile and irreconcilable when they stem from non-overlapping dimensions. An argument about the application or misapplication of different philosophies or counseling strategies to man in general is useless. There is no "man in general", such as abstractly conceived by Boy and Pine (1972), there are only different

individuals. And every individual starts with a developmental potential different both in quantity and quality of its components.

Summary

The key to the understanding of the theory of positive disintegration lies in two concepts: "multilevelness" and "developmental potential". These two concepts serve as the axioms of the theory.

The concept of multilevelness is illustrated by a comparison of two case studies, one depicting a personality structure without discernible levels ("unilevel"), the other depicting a personality with discernible levels ("multilevel"). The differentiation of higher and lower levels of development rests on the criteria of their different organization and their invariant evolutionary sequence.

The concept of the developmental potential is defined as the "constitutional endowment which determines the character and the extent of mental growth possible for an individual." The developmental potential has three components: the first provides for the hereditary endowment, the second provides for responsiveness to social influence, and the third provides for autonomous forces of personality growth.

The quality and the strength of the developmental potential in any given individual can be assessed from the presence of five forms of psychic over-excitability: psychomotor, sensual, emotional, imaginal, and intellectual. These five forms can be regarded as five dimensions of mental functioning.

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