Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

DISCOVERIES FROM RESEARCH AND THEORY DEVELOPMENT

Rethinking Dąbrowski's Theory II:
It's Not All Flat Here

Michael M. Piechowski

Unilevel disintegration, the second level in Dąbrowski's theory, does not have a structure comparable to the higher levels. It also lacks direction. If so, one is bound to ask what is developmental about it and what, in fact, is developing in level II. Two classsic studies and one of highly gifted adults show three possible kinds of emotional development on the not-so-flat plane of level II: a personal growth from black-and-white to relativistic thinking, from no sense of self to an individual self, and fulfillment of one's talents as a productive member of society. Viewing the levels as types of development makes clear that the first two levels are not precursors to advanced development.

Keywords: development of self, emotional development, ethical development, gifted adults, intellectual development, level II, relativism, theory of positive disintegration, unilevel disintegration

PREAMBLE

The goal of this article is to address a neglected area in Dąbrowski's theory of positive disintegration, a theory of emotional development. By *development* Dąbrowski meant personal growth much like scaling a mountain rather than the sequential unfolding of childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. His theory attracted attention for two reasons: one, it is a theory that makes sense of emotional development of gifted children and adults and, two, it represents a masterful effort to rescue from psychopathology the characteristics of the gifted (overexcitabilities) and their developmental crises. The theory addresses the inner struggles to become an authentic self, struggles that also place one at odds with social reality.

Overexcitability—the descriptive component of Dąbrowski's theory—has become familiar, in research and practice, as a recognizable characteristic of gifted children and adults. Overexcitability has also become part of the definition of giftedness as asynchronous development (Silverman, 1997). The theory defines five developmental levels: primary integration (level I), unilevel disintegration (level II), spontaneous multilevel disintegration (level III), organized multilevel disintegration (level IV), secondary integration (level V). The challenge in understanding the theory lies in the fact that the levels are not successive stages but represent different types of development. Furthermore, level I is not the starting point of development in Dąbrowski's sense (Piechowski, 2014b).

The five-level edifice of the theory has found little application in gifted education despite the fact that adolescence is often a time of deep emotional change of the positive disintegration kind. The exception is Jackson's work on depression in gifted adolescents (Jackson, 1998; Jackson & Moyle, 2008a, 2008b; Jackson, Moyle, & Piechowski, 2009; Jackson & Peterson, 2003) and Peterson's work (Peterson, 2012, 2014).

Part I presented the argument that the label *primary integration* is misleading and should be discarded (Piechowski, 2014b, 2015). The argument was based on research in child development.

LEVEL II UNTIL NOW

Level II, the so-called unilevel disintegration, has not received much attention. Whatever happens there lacks the charisma of the more advanced levels that are filled with intense inner struggles and are populated by lofty moral exemplars.

The paradox of Dąbrowski's theory is that as a theory of development it includes two levels in which there is little or no development. Dąbrowski often referred to the first level as adevelopmental and to the second as a process of loosening of rigid mental structures. This loosening occurs "on a single structural and emotional level" (Dąbrowski, 1964, p. 6)—which sounds almost like a negation of development. The puzzle of level II is this: what develops here, and is there a significant emotional growth?

Level II is often treated with disdain—as if the psychological life at this level were not worthy of exploration (Piechowski, 2014b). Though level III presents a distinct profile and has been explored through case studies and other research (Mróz, 2002, 2009; Piechowski, 1990, 1992, 2009; Spaltro, 1991), the second level of Dąbrowski's theory is rather amorphous. In his posthumous book *W poszukiwaniu zdrowia psychicznego* (*In Search of Mental Health*), Dąbrowski (1996) described the plane of unilevel disintegration as follows:

> Individuals belonging to this group demonstrate some capacity for development, a certain developmental loosening, or even breakdown, although of unclear direction. Developmental direction is unclear because a distinct hierarchy of values is lacking. Such individuals are characterized by ambivalences and ambitendencies, contradictory drives and actions, changeable moods with *prevalence of negative elements*: sadness and dejection, typically with cyclic shifts from one mood to another. Their feelings alternate between inferiority and superiority, between syntony and opposition. The lack of a distinct developmental direction resolves in frequent suicidal tendencies and grave psychological disturbances. The inner psychic milieu of such individuals evidences unilevel development. (p. 43, my translation, italics added)

Despite its negative loading, this description allows for "some capacity for development." Because it is restricted to one plane, what might be this capacity? The second level's central feature is the lack of a hierarchy of values. In earlier writing, Dąbrowski emphasized "the absence of a clear hierarchic factor that would appraise specific attitudes" (1962, p. 83). An example of a hierarchic factor is the dynamism of positive maladjustment. When one catches on to the disparity between "what is"—injustice, dishonesty, exploitation, denial of human rights—and "what ought to be"—the universal values of justice, truth, fairness, and respect for human rights—it creates a strong reaction. Dąbrowski did not mean that everyone agrees on universal values but only that people at advanced levels of development do, people like Socrates, Abraham Lincoln, Mahatma Gandhi, Albert Schweitzer, Father Kolbe, and Janusz Korczak (Dąbrowski, 1970). One can add Eleanor Roosevelt, Etty Hillesum, Dag Hammarskjoeld, Peace Pilgrim, Dorothy Day, Abraham H. Maslow, Nelson Mandela, Bishop Tutu, Muhammad Yunus, Malala Yusafzai, and modern martyrs such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer,

Martin Luther King, Jr., Archbishop Janani Luwum, Bishop Oscar Romero, Maria Skobtsova (Craig, 1985), and Fr. Jerzy Popiełuszko, who as a witness to truth and human dignity inspired Solidarity and whose murder accelerated the end of communism in Poland (Ruane, 2004).

No such agreement on universal values exists at level II; instead, values are viewed as changeable and relative, conforming to local beliefs and prejudices. On this plane, one frequently hears the argument that ultimately the motivation behind the ideals of moral exemplars is basically selfish. The cognitive and emotional myopia of unilevel mentality flattens out the multilevel mountain of higher ideals to a pancake.

Level II (unilevel disintegration), according to Dąbrowski, has the following features:

> Ambivalences—Mood fluctuations, alternating feelings of inferiority and superiority, approach and avoidance, love and hate.
>
> Ambitendencies—Changeable and contradictory courses of action involve self-defeating behaviors and irreconcilable desires.
>
> Second factor—The individual's values, ideas, and aspirations are governed by social opinion and the need to conform; values and ideals are assumed always to be relative.
>
> Syntony—Positive emotions toward others can easily turn to resentment or jealousy; a tendency to be overly involved with others may turn to dependency or enmeshment. Sensitivity and irritability exist side by side. Identification with others is more likely with the image one has of a person than with the essence of that person (Dąbrowski, 1970, 1977).

Dąbrowski used the metaphor of a directing and disposing center for what today is referred to as *executive function*. It is the individual's will. Unilevel will is expressed in ambitendencies. One could say that there are many wills at work and, not infrequently, at cross purposes. Dąbrowski pointed to adolescence as a period during which direction often changes. Consequently, one can hear teenagers say that they feel like being many selves or many "I"s (Piechowski, 2014a).

Even though level II purports to be a level of development through positive disintegration, none of its features display anything to qualify as emotional and personal growth. The picture we have so far is dominated by emotional fluctuations, inner contradictions, adaptation to societal norms, and lack of depth in relationships.

SOURCES OF MATERIAL TO FILL IN THE WHITE AREAS OF LEVEL II

Three research studies will serve as sources of material to reveal the panorama of genuine emotional development in level II: A study of intellectual and ethical development of

college students (Perry, 1970, 1970/1998); a study of the development of self, voice, and mind in women (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986, 1997); and a study of self-actualization and morality in highly gifted adults (Ruf, 1998, 2009). All three studies are based on numerous interviews and questionnaire material. Perry's study is the oldest but not outdated as evidenced by it being reprinted in 1998. In addition, a review of subsequent research and theoretical refinements showed that Perry's model continues to serve well in assessment of how students view knowledge, in career planning, in the teaching and learning environment, and in other areas (Moore, 2002).

FROM BLACK AND WHITE THINKING TO ACHIEVEMENT OF RELATIVISM OR THE LIQUEFACTION OF A RIGID BELIEF STRUCTURE

Between 1954 and 1963, William G. Perry (1970) conducted a study of intellectual and ethical development of college students. Volunteers for the study were interviewed each year; 80% were men attending Harvard and 20% were women attending Radcliffe. A total of 84 4-year interviews were obtained. The students came with a set of beliefs and a worldview brought from home, church, and school, largely unquestioned. At Harvard they met with a diverse body of students and faculty, though, naturally, the diversity of 50 years ago was not what it is today. Perry (1970) cited, as an indicator of diversity, that 72% of the students were from out of state but does not mention racial and ethnical composition.

The entering students' thinking was characteristically dualistic, black and white: their own worldview was right and good and all others wrong and bad. Now at college they encountered a confounding multiplicity of views, values, and assumptions about what is true. They resisted the uncertainty but eventually accommodated it by adopting the position that "anyone has a right to his opinion." Coursework in social sciences and humanities continued to press them to learn that all knowledge and all values depend on context and consequently are relative.

It is not easy to give up the unquestioned beliefs one grew up with. Many students reported periods of conscious struggle: "All this diversity has subjected my attitude to considerable doubt. It no longer stands on the ground it once stood on" (Perry, 1970, p. 175); "You constantly have times of doubt and tension—a natural thing in existing and being open, trying to understand the world around you" (Perry, 1970, p. 165). For some students college was a "shattering experience" of "tearing down old patterns" (Perry, 1970, p. 123).

They struggled to keep their earlier security of hometown values against being at sea with mounting relativistic uncertainties and against the apprehension about further changes leading possibly to catastrophic disorganization. The urge to move forward in opposition to the urge to conserve is an example of unilevel conflict. It does not involve a hierarchy of values.

Perry did not take ability into account. The struggle to keep up with heavy load of homework was exacerbated by pressure to revamp their thinking. They saw as the "brains" those who embraced relativism easily.

Interestingly, Perry (1970) says that "the Position at which a student was rated as a freshman was not predictive of the position in his senior year" (p. 56). In other words, some black and white dualists became genuine relativists, and some espousing multiplicity and pluralism of views of the unexamined sort (everyone's opinion is as good as anyone else's) could still hold that position as seniors. A minority acknowledged avoiding, denying, or fighting something. They felt uneasy or dissatisfied.

Those who were aware of their own evolution and maturation toward relativism felt a sense of satisfaction. The urge toward maturity, to take a responsible role in life, came from within themselves. Many forces were moving them forward: curiosity, striving for competence, the urge to resolve incongruities and dissonances. The anomalies of their experience were forcing them to expand their way of seeing things. To open up to the new requires accommodation rather than assimilation (incorporating the new into one's old ready-made schemas that require no reorganization of mental furniture). They desired authenticity in personal relationships and an identity.

Trying to describe the many influences on his mental growth, one student said, "It's like an amoeba which extends a pseudopodium in one direction and follows the whole thing" (Perry, 1970, p. 165). We can complete the image knowing that moments later the amoeba extends a pseudopodium in another direction and thus obtain an apt image of ambitendencies. No focal direction is operating, just one attractor or another. But lack of direction does not mean that no growth is taking place.

Amidst all the contextual variety and uncertainty of what is securely true, the relativist has to develop and affirm his own values, his own way of examining evidence and evaluating the basis for different views.

Many questions face students in their college years: Why do we exist? Can one have objective morality? What is the basis for evaluating life choices? What are my principles? What is my responsibility? Perry (1970) cites the interview material extensively but includes hardly any specifics to illuminate how the students wrestled with these issues. He says that the goal of education for the young men is to embrace relativism and at the same time to develop an identity, choose a vocation, and develop one's own set of values in the relativistic context; in short, to choose a way of life that one can commit oneself to. He regards relativism as the triumph of human thought perhaps equal to the development of language. Might one transcend relativism? Perry considered the possibility that one could

commit to faith in the Absolute and at the same time feel morally obliged to respect other positions and abstain from attempts to convert others to one's own.

A minority of students resisted the intellectual paradigm offered at Harvard. Some felt that they were drifting—an epitome of unilevel process. Some waited for outside events or fate to decide for them; others were slow to grasp what was expected of them. Still others reacted strongly against the intellectual efforts of relativism and regressed into the unexamined pluralism of everyone's position being as good as anyone else's. There were also those who clung to the original authority familiar to them and those who totally rejected any establishment. One senior said that he gained by being at Harvard but without losing anything. He assimilated the knowledge without letting it change his way of thinking.

A new way of thinking may take a long time to develop proficiency in it. It demands an emotional adjustment amidst nonhierarchical searching and floundering: "I haven't had enough practice to think that way" (Perry, 1970, p. 180). Those who prefer accumulating information, to have a ground to stand on, are more likely to be concrete thinkers who find exhausting and confusing the lack of definitive answers in social sciences and humanities, the endless ways of interpreting literature, the numberless contributing causes coming into play in social phenomena. They express their feelings like this (Perry, 1970):

> "I just drift along … perhaps later I may find out … that I'm not happy in my drift"; "it might turn out when I get older, I'll find … I'm living a hollow life." (p. 190)

> "I've never really identified myself definitely with anything." (p. 194)

> "So the best thing I have to do is just forget about deciding. … I mean not to give up on any scheming or any basic set of ideas … that'll give myself, they'll give me a direction. Just give up completely, and when it comes down to individual choices, make them on what I feel like doing emotionally at the moment." (p. 195)

> "I'm very anxious to have some true beliefs. But then it goes away, very quickly; I can't trust my beliefs" (p. 196)—an escape from complexity and yearning to be again cocooned in a secure framework.

What lies ahead is either further growth—and some students expressed a feeling of guilt for their own failure to themselves—or an escape into sheer competence in the hope that "through intensity of focus, all ambivalences will be magically resolved" (Perry, 1970, p. 196). They can also settle into a life of a family member and responsible citizen that nevertheless, some years down the road, may result in a feeling of having missed something. Such

was the case with the gifted men in Kerr and Cohn's (2001) longitudinal study. Or, they can find fulfillment in the application of their talents in what Ruf (2009) called career self-actualization (as opposed to inner self-actualization). Personal growth may or may not be resumed. It is a rare seeker who embarks on the quest for inner transformation.

BECOMING AN INDIVIDUAL SELF

When a sense of self is undeveloped, personal growth takes place toward gaining a sense of one's individuality, coming into one's own as a person. Belenky et al.'s (1986, 1997) study is a rich source for better understanding of the emotional and cognitive growth process that is unilevel. When women liberate themselves from prescribed gender roles, they enter a phase of subjectivism—an uncritical reliance on their own opinions and beliefs. Later a shift takes place from subjectivism to acceptance of reasoning and objective knowledge. Belenky and colleagues called embracing objective knowledge *separate knowing*. Further, when empathic knowing arises in relationship with the object of inquiry, which could be a person or something else, they called it *connected knowing*. Eventually, separate and connected knowing become integrated. Not everyone gets there, of course, and the cases of such integration that the Belenky team cite all appear to be gifted women. Whether it involves any inner transformation of the kind Dąbrowski named multilevel is difficult to know, but clearly the developmental changes they describe are essentially unilevel.

Building on Perry's scheme, Belenky et al. (1986, 1997) conducted extensive interviews with women from various walks of life in order to trace the development of women's sense of self, voice, and mind. Of the 135 women in the study, 90 were students in six diverse academic institutions, and 45 were recruited from family agencies. About the latter the authors said, "Since mothering—the traditional role for women—has as its center the teaching of the next generation, we were particularly interested in how maternal practice might shape women's thinking about human development and the teaching relationship" (Belenky et al., 1986, p. 13).

The study was cross-sectional and only in part longitudinal because some participants were interviewed at different times during their college years. Women were found functioning at various points of the developmental spectrum derived from Perry's schema.

In Rethinking I, the argument was that primary integration describes not a type of personality but a condition of life shaped by social power structure and economics. Nowhere is this more evident than in a male-dominated society where women are subjugated in their gender-stereotypic roles. In extreme cases they have no sense of self and no voice of their own. Their identity derives from what they do, not who they are. They feel "passive,

reactive, and dependent, they see authority as all-powerful" (Belenky et al., 1986, p. 27). They exist without self-reflection, not unlike the young gifted adolescents who have not yet thought about their own self (Piechowski, 2014a). It is not easy to tell from quoted statements what is type and what is deficiency brought on by subjugation. For example, a woman said, "I think my mind is really structured. I have to have things all clearly laid out in front of me" (Belenky et al., 1986, p. 42); a gifted girl said, "I like to learn and I like to do things well. I am a person who likes things to be clearly defined—I want to know what is expected of me in a given situation" (Piechowski, 2014a, p. 223). Both statements sound characteristic of the action-oriented type of person who requires order and organization. Surface similarity of the two examples does not tell us whether or not they are at the same developmental level.

A female college freshman said, "I am nice—polite to people, that kind of thing. I like to be nice to people—to help people" (Belenky et al., 1986, p. 46); a gifted male high school student said that his feeling of pleasure came from knowing "I've done something right, or that I've done something that helps another person. I've helped this person when he or she is better off when they leave than when they came" (Piechowski, 2014a, p. 214). One cannot assign level to the motivation to be kind and helpful without knowing more about the people following this principle.

At the lower end are women who, like Perry's freshmen, did not question the authority's view of how the world works. Neither did they question the subservient place assigned to them. They did not have a sense of themselves as individuals in their own right.

Those who trust external authority unquestioningly depend on it for defining who they are. They derive a sense of self from their role, from what they do rather than from who they are: "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). One cannot help but notice the parallel with giftedness defined as doing, as producing gifted behaviors, as opposed to giftedness as an attribute of the person, with right to self-determination (Grant & Piechowski, 1999; Subotnik, Olszewski-Kubilius, & Worrell, 2011).

For Perry's Harvard boys the disintegrative push came from their encounter with diverse points of view. Dualism had to loosen up and give way to acceptance of multiplicity of perspectives. For the Belenky team's women, the disintegrative push came from fissures in the authority's facade.

A crisis erupts when authority is exposed as wrong, deceiving, or physically and sexually abusive. This can happen in the context of family, church, or of the whole nation as it did during the Vietnam War. Feeling betrayed, people reject the authority that has failed them. They begin to look for self-knowledge and self-definition in people like themselves and eventually in themselves.

The first step is to move from passively accepting what the authority dictates and replace it with trust in the thoughts and feelings of people one is close to; "you do just what everyone does" (Belenky et al., 1986, p. 38). Then it becomes possible to trust one's own thoughts and feelings. The next step is the quest for self. In a radical shift, a person moves away from dependence on authority figures and begins to listen to her inner voice. But the voice is undeveloped, and whatever comes from the "gut" is taken uncritically. The voice cannot be yet said to represent the true self. If emotional growth leads no further than the person's gut feeling, it will be swayed by moods, opinions, chance experiences, those Dąbrowskian ambivalences and ambitendencies. One of the women in the study described how she ceased to obey the whims of authorities and stopped thinking of herself as dumb and ignorant:

> 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)

Other women expressed similar change in themselves, the first stirrings of their own inner knowing:

> It's like a certain feeling that you have inside you. It's like someone could say something to you and you have a feeling. I don't know if it's like a jerk or something inside you. It's hard to explain. (Belenky et al., 1986, p. 69)

It is possible that the feeling of a jerk suggests what Gestalt psychologists and Gendlin (1981) described as the internal shift when a problem is solved—the feeling of things falling into place.

> There's a part of me that I didn't even realize I had until recently—instinct, intuition, whatever. It helps me and protects me. It's perceptive and astute. I just listen to the inside of me and I know what to do. (Belenky et al., 1986, p. 69)

Total rejection of any authority marks the phase of subjectivism and affirmation of personal truth. Continued emotional growth is definitely possible. The process of growing toward a sense of self is very tender and most likely different from how identity forms in adolescence.

School and church, the principal agents of socialization and trimming individuality, stress following the rules as a model of good behavior. To break away from the trust in rules is particularly difficult if there is no guidance from anyone. The quest for self is arduous:

> 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., 1986, p. 61)

Fluctuations in the sense of self but also exhilaration and optimism in the process of change are expressed in the examples below:

I'm only the person that I am at this moment. Tomorrow I'm somebody different, and the day after that I'm somebody different. … I'm always changing. Everything is always changing. (Belenky et al., 1986, p. 83)

It's hard to say who I am because I don't really think about more than tomorrow. In the future I'll probably have a better understanding, because now I simply don't know. I think it will really be a fun thing to find out. Just do everything until I find out. (Belenky et al., 1986, p. 83)

Opening to novelty and change is expressed in imagery of birth, rebirth, and childhood, a significant step in personal growth even though it is far from multilevel:

Right now I'm so busy being born, discovering who I am, that I don't know who I am. And I don't know where I'm going. And everything is going to be fine. (Belenky et al., 1986, p. 82)

The person I see myself as now is just like an infant. I see myself as beginning. Whoever I can become, that's a wide-open possibility. (Belenky et al., 1986, p. 82)

I actually think that the person I am now is only about three to 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., 1986, p. 82)

Emotional growth within the unilevel universe of level II calls for further exploration. The above examples show that not all material has to be generated from the framework of Dąbrowski's theory. Beyond Belenky et al. (1986) there no doubt exists research literature that can be explored to flesh out some of his concepts in a mosaic of living color.

HIGHLY GIFTED NONSEARCHERS OF LEVEL II: GOOD LIVES, STABLE LIVES

For her research on highly gifted adults, Deborah Ruf assessed the Dąbrowski level of emotional development on the basis of descriptive criteria in the existing literature (Ruf, 1998, 2009). To decide whether a subject was at the level of transformative process, she relied also on descriptors of self-

actualization (Maslow, 1970). With this in mind she developed three categories: searchers, neutral, and nonsearchers. Those who were "still actively deciding who they are and what they want to be … [they] examine and re-examine themselves" (Ruf, 2009, p. 276) are the searchers. They show evidence of "emotional and ideological struggles"; that is, positive disintegration. Nonsearchers are the opposite, their identity decided early. They neither examine nor search their inner selves. They may be quite successful in their careers; that is, outwardly realizing their potential, or only partially, and yet be content with their lives. The neutral category is more elusive: "Someone who is neither clearly a Searcher or a Nonsearcher" (Ruf, 2009, p. 276). Nearly half (17 out of 41) of Ruf's subjects were assigned the neutral category. "Nonsearchers make statements that indicate their need to be in control of their environments and particularly themselves. Neutral people do not clearly indicate as strong a need for self control as Nonsearchers" (Ruf, 1998, p. 60).

Ruf (1998) culled together the following criteria for level II[1]:

Stereotypical Roles: Highly influenced by others, values introjected from parents, church, etc., relativistic, situational values, conflicted feelings, contradictory actions, desire for acceptance, feelings of inadequacy when compared with others, lack of a hierarchy of values. (p. 59)

Let us note at the outset that there was not much evidence of "relativistic, situational values," "contradictory actions," or "lack of a hierarchy of values." Although the values of a good family life, the care and joy of parenting, fulfillment in a career, and helping others may be regarded as conventional, they are still essential components of a life well lived.

There were 19 highly gifted subjects assessed at level II, with IQs from 137 to 167. Half of them (10 out of 19) suffered significant abuse, whether physical, sexual, or emotional. Their early home environments varied from emotionally cold and harsh or neglectful to caring and loving. Often the father was an alcoholic. The overriding issue for most of the subjects was the fact that their family, and more often the school, were not aware of their extremely high intelligence. Rather than supportive they could be hostile. Although the individuals growing up knew they were different, the nature of the difference was not always clear to them. They did not fit in, and in the end many realized that they would never fit in and that they *did not need* to fit in. By this they overcame the tyranny of the second factor, one of the defining motivators in level II, that makes people seek approval and acceptance, to live according to others' expectations.

Ruf's (1998) overview of her findings is worth reproducing here:

Level II people tend to function well in society. They understand and generally abide by the rules, stated and unstated. They understand the culture of their society and

try to fit in and show pride and pleasure when they do. Positive feedback that they have succeeded to meet or exceed society's norms is often important and encouraging [to them]. (p. 60)

Some of the subjects who did not receive sufficient emotional support tried first, both morally and emotionally, to please others and receive positive emotional feedback. Such a need was perhaps the impetus for high career success in a number of the subjects. As highly and profoundly gifted people, these subjects can almost always do whatever needed to be done better than most of the people they know. Many … are outwardly successful. They achieved self-actualization in their careers without achieving it inside themselves. (p. 60)

People who operate at the level of stereotypical roles demonstrated that they were highly influenced by others. "Others" includes not only their parents and church but societal rules, laws, and possible rewards. They tend to need and be motivated by positive feedback from others about their actions and accomplishments more than people at higher emotionally developed levels. (p. 61)

Ruf's highly gifted subjects demonstrate the great variety and complexity of lives within the universe of level II. In fact, she described two kinds of nonsearchers (Ruf, 2009). Let us call them A and B. Nonsearchers A are trying hard to be a good person, they are hard-working, responsible, and nice: "This type of Nonsearchers often discovered fairly early in life how to formulate and meet goals, and once successful at meeting those goals stayed with the original plan" (Ruf, 2009, p. 278). Nonsearchers B accepted the life as it was but "always had someone, or some circumstances, to blame for their own shortcomings or underachievement." They came across as angry, cynical, and negative and consequently resistant to changing themselves: "People who hold on firmly to resentments and their own way of viewing life, whether it makes them happy or not, are highly resistant to positive disintegration."

Sometimes the subjects said contradictory things about their childhood that Ruf interpreted as lack of clear perception of reality. The need to please others and find acceptance was evident in only a few. A strong work ethic and a will to succeed characterize many of these highly gifted individuals. Those with particularly damaging childhoods had difficulty overcoming the emotional wounds of not being wanted, of being denied their potential, and being bullied. Childhoods lacking in love have a lasting effect. It is a rare person who can overcome it (Anthony, 1987; Higgins, 1994). There were some in Ruf's study who believed in their own power to succeed in life and were able to overcome their dipsomania.

Ruf stressed that a number of her nonsearchers emphasized having self-control and control over their lives. Because of this, some appeared inflexible. She interpreted the need for self-control as a way of holding tight to the status quo, as a lack of openness to changing themselves, which would explain why they did not seek therapy. (This kind of self-control is different from the dynamism of self-control at Dąbrowski's level IV that keeps in check the lower self to enact the principles of the higher self.) Though assessed to be at level II, Ruf's subjects did seek answers and found them in religion, or by rejecting religion, or in their own power to reason things out. One woman said that she developed personal strength because she had no positive support in her family. This is an enormously significant growth for her as a person. This is another instance when we find emotional growth within the confines of level II, a growth that is more than, in Dąbrowski's description, just loosening of rigid structures and being buffeted by ambitendencies and ambivalences.

Their main tasks were to own their giftedness and to adapt to the demands of career and, in most cases, raising a family. Ruf (1998) summarized as follows:

The *career* self-actualizers have a number of identifiable characteristics. They have products and accomplishments, awards, and busy schedules. … They tend to find satisfaction and happiness in their accomplishments and tend to recognize their worth as achievers and doers. In fact, a large number of subjects at this level… lead very stable lives. So even without inner transformation, these are people who appear to "live up to their potential." (pp. 123–124)

The concept of level II fits well with the case studies of highly gifted adults and also with the Perry inspired study of women's emotional development. The concept of unilevel disintegration, however, cannot be applied wholly to level II because the majority of lives identified within this level are more or less stable. Even Dąbrowski's concept of partial integration seems to have limited application because it implies that there is some "disintegration" going on or that the person is chronically on the brink of one. This makes little sense. Instead, we should conclude that the lives of most people follow the stages of lifespan development and that some may be so unreflective that they match level I and others are somewhat more reflective and match level II.

CONCLUSIONS

1. The universe of level II is vast, not all flat, with considerable room for personal growth. It is not amorphous and not necessarily lacking in direction and reflection. Dipping into three in-depth studies of cognitive development, achievement of the sense of

self, and career self-actualization is just a beginning in the exploration of this vast (unilevel) universe.

2. The first two studies, addressing intellectual and self-development, lay bare the dynamic features of a unilevel process (ambivalences, ambitendencies). They show the broadening of perspective, changes in worldview, and rejection of social roles that corresponds to Dąbrowski's idea of loosening rigid mental and emotional equipment. The third study identifies career self-actualization that largely fits social norms.

3. In the theory, levels I, II, and III address three types of development. The first is rather confined to an unreflective life following the stages from youth to old age. The second has room for fluctuation, floundering, but also for an expansion of thinking and growth of the self. The third is one of awakening to higher realities and ideals and reaching for them. This type of development continues through levels IV and V. To think of *types of development* instead of levels frees us from the unavoidable automatic suggestion of stages, or rungs on a ladder, that the numbering and stacking of the five levels does.

4. Growth of the self is a huge subject. Here we speak of it in general terms but without precision. We are only making a distinction about the sense of self that is unilevel and a sense of self that involves the differentiation of the higher and the lower in oneself, which is the hallmark of self on the journey toward an authentic self.

5. One of the defining features of level II is susceptibility to social convention and opinion (the so-called second factor). Unilevel growth of the self, which is at once cognitive and emotional, can defy convention by rejecting prescribed social roles, such as of a dutiful daughter, wife, or mother. In this case, personal growth and change breaks out of the control of social convention and opinion.

6. The disintegration part of unilevel development is when people are falling apart, become clinical cases, and are unable to transcend their difficulties by movement to a higher level. In his description, Dąbrowski emphasized "prevalence of negative elements" (Dąbrowski, 1996, p. 43). Though this makes sense in the context of psychopathology, it does not apply to the development portrayed by the three studies.

7. The concept of unilevel *disintegration* can represent level II only in part because evidence shows that the majority of lives that belong here are rather stable. Unilevel churning, turmoil, and collapse—the disintegration piece—is the clinical part of the picture that deals with psychosomatic and psychoneurotic disorders, addictions, psychoses, and so forth (Dąbrowski, 1972).

8. Traumatic life events within the confines of level I may lead to a unilevel disintegration but without any chance for further growth. This is the *negative disintegration*, often referred to by Dąbrowski, where pathological conditions or suicide appear to be the only possibility (Dąbrowski, 1970, 1972).

9. Can the emotional growth revealed in these studies be a precursor to multilevel development? One can suppose that the intellectual breakthrough of achieving broad relativistic thinking, that has room for diverse worldviews, may presage the next step? Similarly, might the breaking out of prescribed social roles be a preparatory step? However, the next step—multilevel development—cannot be set in motion without a strong developmental potential (Piechowski, 2014b).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

NOTE

1. To assess Kohlberg-type moral development, Ruf used the Defining Issues Test (Rest, 1986). All nonsearchers and the majority of neutrals scored at the preconventional and conventional Kohlberg stages of moral reasoning and at Dąbrowski levels I and II. For the whole study of 41 subjects, whose scores extended through all five levels, the correlation between scores on the Defining Issues Test and Dąbrowski level was 0.85.

REFERENCES

Anthony, E. J. (1987). Children at risk for psychosis growing up successfully. In E. J. Anthony & B. J. Cohler (Eds.), *The invulnerable child* (pp. 147–184). New York, NY: Guilford.

Belenky, M. F., Clinchy, B. M., Goldberger, N. R., & Tarule, J. M. (1986). *Women's ways of knowing: The development of self, voice, and mind*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

Belenky, M. F., Clinchy, B. M., Goldberger, N. R., & Tarule, J. M. (1997). *Women's ways of knowing: The development of self, voice, and mind* (10th anniversary ed.). New York, NY: Basic Books.

Craig, M. (1985). *Six modern martyrs*. New York, NY: Crossroads.

Dąbrowski, K. (1962). *Higiena psychiczna* [Mental hygiene]. Warszawa, Poland: Państwowe Zakłady Wydawnictw Szkolnych.

Dąbrowski, K. (1964). *Positive disintegration*. Boston, MA: Little Brown.

Dąbrowski, K. (1972). *Psychoneurosis is not an illness*. London, England: Gryf.

Dąbrowski, K. (1977). *Theory of levels of emotional development* (Vol. 2). Oceanside, NY: Dabor.

Dąbrowski, K. (1996). *W poszukiwaniu zdrowia psychicznego* [In search of mental health]. Warszawa, Poland: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN.

Dąbrowski, K. (with Kawczak, A., & Piechowski, M. M.). (1970). *Mental growth through positive disintegration*. London, England: Gryf.

Gendlin, E. T. (1981). *Focusing* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Bantam.

Grant, B. A., & Piechowski, M. M. (1999). Theories and the good: Toward child-centered gifted education. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, *43*, 4–12. doi:10.1177/001698629904300102

Higgins, G. O. (1994). *Resilient adults*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Jackson, P. S. (1998). Bright star—Black sky: A phenomenological study of depression as a window into the psyche of the gifted adolescent. *Roeper Review*, *20*, 215–221. doi:10.1080/02783199809553894

Jackson, P. S., & Moyle, V. F. (2008a). Inner awakening, outward journey: The intense gifted child in adolescence. In S. Daniels & M. M. Piechowski (Eds.), *Living with intensity* (pp. 57–71). Scottsdale, AZ: Great Potential Press.

Jackson, P. S., & Moyle, V. F. (2008b). Integrating the intense experience: Counseling and clinical applications. In S. Daniels & M. M. Piechowski (Eds.), *Living with intensity* (pp. 105–125). Scottsdale, AZ: Great Potential Press.

Jackson, P. S., Moyle, V. F., & Piechowski, M. M. (2009). Emotional life and psychotherapy of the gifted in light of Dabrowski's theory. In L. Shavinina (Ed.), *International handbook on giftedness* (pp. 439–467). New York, NY: Springer.

Jackson, P. S., & Peterson, J. (2003). Depressive disorder in highly gifted adolescents. *The Journal of Secondary Gifted Education*, *14*, 175–189.

Kerr, B. A., & Cohn, S. J. (2001). *Smart boys*. Scottsdale, AZ: Gifted Potential Press.

Maslow, H. A. (1970). *Motivation and personality* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Harper & Row.

Moore, W. S. (2002). Understanding learning in a postmodern world: Reconsidering the Perry scheme of intellectual and ethical development. In B. K. Hofer & P. R. Pintrich (Eds.), *Personal epistemology: The psychology of beliefs about knowledge and knowing* (pp. 17–36). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Mróz, A. (2002). *Rozwój osoby wedlug teorii dezyntgracji pozytywnej Kazimierza Dąbrowskiego* [Individual development according to Kazimierz Dąbrowski's theory of positive disintegration]. Doctoral dissertation, Catholic University of Lublin, Lublin, Poland.

Mróz, A. (2009). Theory of positive disintegration as a basis for research on assisting development. *Roeper Review*, *31*, 96–102.

Perry, W. G. (1970). *Forms of intellectual and ethical development in the college years*. New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston.

Perry, W. G., Jr. (1998). *Forms of intellectual and ethical development in the college years: A scheme*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass. (Original work published 1970)

Peterson, J. S. (2012). The asset–burden paradox of giftedness: A 15-year phenomenological, longitudinal case study. *Roeper Review*, *34*, 1–17. doi:10.1080/02783193.2012.715336

Peterson, J. S. (2014). Giftedness, trauma, and development: A longitudinal case study. *Journal for the Education of the Gifted*, *37*, 295–318. doi:10.1177/0162353214552564

Piechowski, M. M. (1990). Inner growth and transformation in the life of Eleanor Roosevelt. *Advanced Development*, *2*, 3–53.

Piechowski, M. M. (1992). Etty Hillesum: "The Thinking Heart of the Barracks". *Advanced Development*, *4*, 105–118.

Piechowski, M. M. (2009). Peace Pilgrim, Exemplar of Level V. *Roeper Review*, *31*, 103–112.

Piechowski, M. M. (2014a). *Mellow out, they say. If I only could: Intensities and sensitivities of the young and bright* (2nd Rev. ed.). Unionville, NY: Royal Fireworks Press.

Piechowski, M. M. (2014b). Rethinking Dabrowski's theory. I. The case against primary integration. *Roeper Review*, *36*, 11–17. doi:10.1080/02783193.2013.856829

Piechowski, M. M. (2015). A reply to Mendaglio and Tiller. *Roeper Review*, *37*, 229–233. doi:10.1080/02783193.2015.1077496

Rest, J. R. (1986). *Defining issues test*. Minneapolis, MN: Center for Ethical Development.

Ruane, K. (2004). *To kill a priest: The murder of father Popiełuszko and the fall of communism*. London, England: Gibson Square Books.

Ruf, D. (1998). *Environmental, familial, and personal factors that affect the self-actualization of highly gifted adults: Case studies* (Unpublished dissertation). University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN.

Ruf, D. (2009). Self-actualization and morality of the gifted: Environmental, familial, and personal factors. In D. Ambrose & T. Cross (Eds.), *Morality, ethics, and gifted minds* (pp. 265–283). New York, NY: Springer.

Silverman, L. K. (1997). The construct of asynchronous development. *Peabody Journal of Education*, *72*, 36–58.

Spaltro, K. (1991). "A symbol perfected in death": Etty Hillesum as moral exemplar. *Advanced Development*, *3*, 61–73.

Subotnik, R. F., Olszewski-Kubilius, P., & Worrell, F. C. (2011). Rethinking giftedness and gifted education: A proposed direction forward based on psychological science. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, *12*, 3–54. doi:10.1177/1529100611418056

AUTHOR BIO

Michael M. Piechowski is a Senior Fellow at the Institute for Educational Advancement and the Yunasa summer camp for highly gifted youth. He is the author of *Mellow Out, They Say. If I Only Could: Intensities and Sensitivities of the Young and Bright* and coeditor with Susan Daniels of *Living With Intensity*. E-mail: spirgif@earthlink.net