

# THE APPLICATION OF DABROWSKI'S THEORY TO THE GIFTED

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any gifted children experience high levels of intensity and sensitivity and may appear at odds with their peers. They may question their “normality” or have it questioned by parents and teachers. Piechowski (1997) has suggested that this line of inquiry may extend into adulthood, as many gifted adults feel the same pressure to be “normal” and continue to question their potential, possibilities, and personality ideal. Dabrowski’s (1964) Theory of Positive Disintegration has been discussed as one way of understanding the social and emotional development of gifted children. Relatively little research has addressed the use of Dabrowski’s work with gifted students; however, the studies that have been completed indicate that this may be a promising direction for consideration of the unique social and emotional characteristics that some gifted children and adults may exhibit.

## Dabrowski's Theory

Dabrowski's theory is based on the belief that emotional development is the most essential dimension of human life (Grant & Piechowski, 1999). The theory defines five levels of personality development, explains the process by which development occurs along these levels, and identifies individual characteristics that equate to developmental potential.

Dabrowski's pentatonic levels represent the mapping of human personality, or emotional development, along a continuum from low (egocentric) to high (altruistic). The levels are in ascending order, with the higher levels representing individuals whose personality is defined by a hierarchy of altruistic values. Piechowski (1997) characterized individuals at each of Dabrowski's levels as follows:

*Level I: Primary Integration.* Egocentrism prevails. A person at this level lacks the capacity for empathy and self-examination. When things go wrong, someone else is always to blame; self-responsibility is not encountered here. . . .

*Level II: Unilevel Disintegration.* Individuals are influenced primarily by their social group and by mainstream values . . . They often exhibit ambivalent feelings and indecisive flip-flop behavior because they have no clear-cut set of self-determined internal values. Inner conflicts are horizontal, a contest between equal, competing values. . . .

*Level III: Spontaneous Multilevel Disintegration.* The person develops a hierarchical sense of values. Inner conflict is vertical, a struggle to bring up one's behavior to higher standards. There is a dissatisfaction with what one is, because of a competing sense of what one could and ought to be (personality ideal). . . .

*Level IV: Organized Multilevel Disintegration.* Individuals are well on the road to self-actualization. They have found a way to reach their own ideals, and they are effective leaders in society. They show high levels of responsibility,

authenticity, reflective judgment, empathy for others, autonomy of thought and action, self-awareness. . . .

*Level V: Secondary Integration.* The struggle for self-mastery has been won. Inner conflicts regarding the self have been resolved through actualization of the personality ideal. Disintegration has been transcended by the integration of one's values into one's living and being. (p. 374).

Development along Dabrowski's levels comes through a process of lower level cognitive-emotional structures being dismantled and replaced by higher level structures. Dabrowski referred to this process as "positive disintegration" to emphasize the beneficial aspects of breaking down inferior and reconstructing superior personality attributes. The hallmark of Dabrowski's conception of development is inner conflict achieved by a disconnection between "what is" and "what ought to be" in one's self (Dabrowski, in Piechowski, 1975). Dabrowski (1972) believed that many individuals who exhibit neurotic characteristics (i.e., intense inner conflict, feelings of inferiority regarding one's self, dissatisfaction with one's self, feelings of inadequacy, disquietude, anxiety) also possess the greatest potential for development. He further viewed "positive maladjustment" as a prerequisite to the development of authenticity and emphasized its positive effects (Dabrowski; Dabrowski, Kawczak, & Piechowski, 1970; Dabrowski & Piechowski, 1977). In his clinical work, Dabrowski observed that gifted and creative individuals are often in conflict with the demands and expectations of their environment, which are commonly incompatible with their higher value structure (Dabrowski; Dabrowski, Kawczak, & Piechowski).

### **The Concept of Developmental Potential**

Dabrowski's levels do not represent stages of development; movement to a higher level is not automatic, and most individuals do not advance to the highest levels. In the concept of developmental potential, obtaining higher levels of development is contingent

upon one's original endowment of intelligence, special talents and abilities, will to develop, and five forms of experiencing called *overexcitabilities*. Many in the gifted community believe Dabrowski's overexcitabilities, as they contribute to developmental potential, are a measure and indicator of giftedness.

Piechowski (1999) characterized overexcitabilities as enhanced modes of being in the world. The word *over* used in connection with *excitability* connotes responses to stimuli that are beyond normal and often of a different quality. Dabrowski (1937, 1938) identified "psychic overexcitability" in five forms: psychomotor, sensual, intellectual, imaginal, and emotional. Piechowski and Cunningham (1985) explained the expressions of each overexcitability as:

*Psychomotor overexcitability.* Is an organic excess of energy or heightened excitability of the neuromuscular system. It may manifest itself as a love of movement for its own sake, rapid speech, violent or impulsive activity, restlessness, pressure for action, and drivenness. It may be viewed as a capacity for being active and energetic. . . .

*Sensual overexcitability.* Is expressed in the heightened experience of sensual pleasure, the seeking of sensual outlets for inner tension. Beyond desires for comfort, luxury, stereotyped or refined beauty, the pleasure in being admired and being in the limelight, sensual overexcitability may be expressed in the simple pleasure derived from touching things . . . or the pleasure of taste and smell. . . . In short, it is a capacity for sensual enjoyment. . . .

*Intellectual overexcitability.* Is to be distinguished from intelligence. It manifests itself as persistence in asking probing questions, avidity for knowledge and analysis, preoccupation with theoretical problems. Other expressions are: a sharp sense of observation, independence of thought (often expressed in criticism), symbolic thinking, development of new concepts, striving for synthesis of knowledge, and searching for truth. . . .

*Imaginational overexcitability.* Is recognized through rich association of images and impressions, inventiveness, vivid and often animated visualization, use of image and metaphor in verbal expression. . . . Intense living in the world of fantasy, predilection for fairy and magic tales, poetic creations and dramatizing to escape boredom are also observed. . . .

*Emotional overexcitability.* Is recognized in the way emotional relationships are experienced, and in the great intensity of feeling and awareness of its whole range. Characteristic expressions are: inhibition (timidity and shyness) and excitation (enthusiasm), strong affective recall of past experiences or concern with death, fears, anxieties, or depressions. There may be intense loneliness, an intense desire to offer love, a concern for others. There is a high degree of differentiation of interpersonal feeling. (pp. 154–156)

Advanced development, characteristic of a deeper sensitivity and intensity of emotional experiencing, requires a profound knowledge of self and a more meaningful contact with the environment (Dabrowski, 1972). Overexcitabilities assist in meeting these essentials:

One could say that one who manifests a given form of overexcitability, and especially one who manifests several forms of overexcitability, sees reality in a different, stronger, and more multisided manner. Reality for such an individual ceases to be indifferent but affects him deeply and leaves longlasting impressions. Enhanced excitability is thus a means for more frequent interactions and a wider range of experiencing. (Dabrowski, p. 7)

While the concept of developmental potential emphasizes the positive aspects of experiencing life with greater intensity and sensitivity, these same characteristics may also be experienced in negative ways. Individuals with elevated overexcitabilities are more susceptible to being misunderstood and alienated by those who don't share

or understand their unique personality traits (Lewis, Kitano, & Lynch, 1992; Lovecky, 1992; Piechowski, 1997; Silverman, 1993). Many individuals with elevated overexcitabilities attempt to hide or learn to control their intensities and sensitivities in order to conform to the expectations of others (Lewis, Kitano, & Lynch). Silverman acknowledges the position of such individuals, explaining that “Feeling everything more deeply than others do is both painful and frightening” (p. 17).

### Research on the Theory

Researchers in the gifted education community have been interested in research and reflection about Dabrowski’s theory for its appeal as a means of broadening the conception of giftedness by taking into account the personality attributes related to high ability (Piechowski, 1986). While adult biographical and case study analyses have provided evidence in support of Dabrowski’s levels (Brennan, 1987; Brennan & Piechowski, 1991; Grant, 1990; Piechowski, 1975, 1978, 1990), studies with gifted students have focused strictly on the concept of developmental potential. This reflects what Piechowski (1986) described as a research direction aimed at measuring the presence and strength of the overexcitabilities as they contribute to the definition and identification of the gifted.

Measuring overexcitability is made possible through the use of the Overexcitability Questionnaire—Two (Falk, Lind, Miller, Piechowski, & Silverman, 1999), a 50-item, Likert-type scale instrument that is designed to measure the presence and degree of the five overexcitabilities. The studies discussed in this review used an earlier version of the questionnaire with 21-item free responses (Lysy & Piechowski, 1983). Piechowski and Colangelo (1984) compared gifted students with gifted adults and nongifted adults. Their results showed that elevated emotional, intellectual, and imaginal overexcitability scores clearly distinguished the gifted participants, both students and adults, from the nongifted. Gallagher (1986) found this overexcitability pattern could distinguish a group of gifted sixth-grade students from their nonidentified peers, and Schiever (1985) used the same profile to differentiate between high-

creative and low-creative seventh- and eighth-grade students. Breard (1994) found that gifted upper elementary students obtained higher overexcitability scores than nongifted students across all five forms of overexcitability. Ackerman (1997) found similar results with a comparison of gifted and nongifted high school students with psychomotor, intellectual, and emotional overexcitabilities acting as the major discriminates between the groups. In a study that compared the overexcitability profiles of intellectually gifted and creatively gifted middle school students, no significant differences were found (Ely, 1995).

Research using adult gifted and nongifted samples illustrates how the distinguishing characteristic of overexcitability may exist throughout the life span (Falk, Manzanero, & Miller, 1997; Miller, Silverman, & Falk, 1994; Piechowski & Cunningham, 1985; Piechowski, Silverman, & Falk, 1985; Silverman & Ellsworth, 1981). Overexcitabilities have also been exhibited in young (pre-school) gifted children (Howard, 1994; Kitano, 1990; Silverman, 1983; Tucker & Hafenstein, 1997).

## Discussion

The ideas that neurotic symptoms may be a sign of emotional development, that individuals can be “positively maladjusted,” and that “overexcitability” can be considered a positive attribute make Dabrowski’s theory more controversial in mainstream psychological theory and practice. However, parents of gifted children and gifted individuals themselves may find that Dabrowski’s ideas provide a useful “framework for understanding and explaining the developmental patterns and challenges that occur for those of high ability” (Nelson, 1989, p. 11).

Those providing counseling services to the gifted should consider adding Dabrowski’s concepts to their knowledge of developmental and psychological theory. As maladjustment and inner conflict may be necessary for some to gain a deeper and more emotional development, counselors and therapists can provide an empathic environment. This sentiment is echoed by Silverman (1993), who wrote, “One of the greatest gifts a counselor can give

gifted young people is an appreciation of their sensitivities, intensities, and passions” (p. 17).

For educators interested in alternate means of identifying students for gifted programs, Dabrowski’s concept of developmental potential through enhanced overexcitabilities may provide a viable option. By moving beyond IQ measures and defining giftedness in terms of an elevated overexcitability profile, a wider range of students may be identified for gifted programs (Ackerman, 1997; Breard, 1994; Nelson 1989; Piechowski, 1979, 1986). Currently, overexcitability instruments are not conducive for schoolwide identification procedures; the Overexcitability Questionnaire—Two is designed solely for research with group data and not intended to provide individual diagnostic information (Falk, Lind, Miller, Piechowski, & Silverman, 1999), and the original Overexcitability Questionnaire is limited by its length of administration time, required level of writing skills and expressive language, and cost of scoring or training raters (Ackerman, 1997). Future research can help to develop an overexcitability instrument that can be used as part of an identification procedure in schools.

Since Dabrowski’s (1964) first discussion of his theory, some research has been sporadically conducted in support of the theory’s relevance to and implications for the gifted and talented. While this contemplation and discussion of the viability of Dabrowski’s work continues, supporters of the theory should consider enhancing their argument by providing further empirical data that strengthen the link between the theory and the life experiences of gifted individuals.

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