

REVIEW ARTICLES AND COMMENTARY

DABROWSKI'S THEORY OF POSITIVE DISINTEGRATION AND ITS USE WITH GIFTED CHILDREN

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Abstract

Dabrowski's Theory of Positive Disintegration is a theory about personality development. It has been hailed by some, including Mendaglio (2008), as a 'theory for the 21st century'. In the past thirty years, its use has gained popularity, particularly in the fields of education and counselling of gifted students. The fundamental basis of this theory, however, has rarely been questioned. This article analyses the nature of the research supporting the theory, and highlights some of the issues in the origins and validation of the theory, advising that, as a framework for identifying, understanding and counselling the gifted, it should be used with caution.

Introduction

Many theories about emotional intelligence and personality have been formulated. One such theory is the Theory of Positive Disintegration (TPD), a theory about personality development, proposed by Polish psychologist Kazimierz Dabrowski in the latter half of the 20th century. *Positive disintegration* is the process by which personality is achieved in two stages: the destruction of primitive mental structures and a reintegration at a higher level of functioning or moral behaviour. In an interview in 2007, Mendaglio explained TPD:

Positive disintegration is a unique theory, an expression of Dabrowski's multifaceted creativity. ... The essence of the theory is that psychological growth cannot occur without a disintegration of our initial mental organisation. ... He [Dabrowski] literally reframed familiar concepts in personality theory. Words like personality, disintegration, adjustment, neuroses, psychoneuroses,

development, anxiety, depression, guilt were given new meanings.

According to Silverman (2008, p.157), TPD was initially included in the field of gifted education in 1979 owing to two people, her 'office mates', who championed the theory in relation to both the identification and counselling of the gifted. First, Piechowski published works claiming that TPD included elements that were much better indicators of giftedness and creativity than the checklists that existed at the time. Second, TPD was endorsed by Colangelo, who described how it could be used for counselling the gifted. As a result of their promotion of the theory in the late 1970s, it was gradually adopted over the next 25 years across America and Australia, particularly in the field of gifted education.

Since then, many conference papers, journal articles and books based on Dabrowski's theory have been published. However, one major oversight seems to have occurred, and one that is fundamental to all research: verification and validation of this theory. Most publications about Dabrowski's TPD are based on the assumption that Dabrowski's research has a rock solid foundation, i.e. that the research and analysis were rigorously conducted and then verified by a number of other researchers. But this does not appear to have been the case. Although some empirical testing, based on autobiographies, was conducted by Piechowski in an attempt to validate Dabrowski's specific research, no-one else appears to have actually verified Dabrowski's original research. It has, more often than not, just been taken for granted, at least in North America and in Australia (the Dabrowski Europe group would appear to be an exception).

The nature of the research

It seems that Dabrowski relied on only a small number of personal colleagues to conduct the research, and the selection of research participants, the collection of empirical data and the analysis of results were completed by one person, Piechowski. Silverman confirms (2008, p.158) how Dabrowski's theory came to be acknowledged: 'Dabrowski originated the

conceptual framework and Piechowski contributed to the translation, the empirical support, content analysis techniques, application of the theory and the methodology, and to the introduction of the theory into gifted education.'

According to Piechowski (2008, p.45), Dabrowski was given a three-year research grant through Canada Council to 'showcase his theory through a multi-faceted analysis of case examples'. Volunteers were then asked to 'write autobiographies and open-ended responses to verbal stimuli, take an intelligence test and take a neurological exam' (Piechowski, 2008, p.45). The 'neurological exam' was created by Dabrowski and Amend, a member of the research team. This exam does not appear to have been validated or standardised in any way, and yet it was used as part of Dabrowski's initial identification process.

In 1972, while Dabrowski continued work on compiling his book, *Psychoneurosis is not an illness*, his research team of two screened hundreds of volunteers, from which 81 were carefully selected to write autobiographies and complete the Verbal Stimuli survey. The instructions for the latter were to 'describe freely in relation to each word listed your emotional associations and experiences' (Piechowski, 2008, p.46). Stimuli listed included: 'great sadness, great joy, death, uncertainty, solitude and loneliness, suicide, nervousness, inhibition, inner conflict, ideal, success and immortality' (Piechowski, 2008, p.46). Dabrowski, with his two research team members, then sifted through the written material, identifying key emotional events representative of each proposed level of TPD. This was clearly quite a subjective process as they had to make judgements about what the volunteers had written, what they meant and how intensely they felt or reacted, and then match these with the levels in Dabrowski's theory. (See Appendix 1 for a summary of the five levels of development.)

Piechowski, whose training was in plant physiology followed by molecular biology, and not psychological research, was then asked to 'tie the terms of the theory to personal expressions of experience' (Piechowski, 2008, p.47). His job was to numerically rate all the written responses with the aim of achieving empirical data. He dissected the written responses into smaller sections and gave them a numerical expression according to which level of TPD he thought they belonged. Since then, it seems, no-one has

replicated the findings, and many have made the assumption that Dabrowski's theory is sound.

Questions about the research design

Dabrowski's method and design had some rather significant flaws. First, instead of using a standardised intelligence or performance test, Dabrowski, with the assistance of Amend, designed the 'neurological exam' that dictated which participants were to be selected. This instrument appears not to have associated validity and reliability studies, and test bias appears not to have been regulated. Assumptions about personality and the development of Dabrowski's theory followed from the use of this selection procedure.

Second, it appears that the selection process was only conducted by Dabrowski's two team members, and was not overseen by anyone else. Personal errors of judgement, which may have occurred, were not identified or corrected.

Third, the empirical data were collected and analysed by only one person, Piechowski, and one should again question the process involved. Piechowski was a biologist, and a friend of Dabrowski's, but was not familiar with the field of psychology. Piechowski himself clearly expressed concern about how well he could discern which written response matched which of Dabrowski's levels of development, and whether the responses were overlapping or completely independent of one another (Piechowski, 2008, p.52). He also used a sampling method of his own creation, which he openly admits was not verified by any other psychologist. Piechowski states that since 'there was no possibility of carrying out a blind analysis, [he] made every effort to be meticulous about dissecting the (written) material as consistently as possible' (Piechowski, 2008, p.62). However, the extent to which this was actually achieved is, at the least, difficult to ascertain without an appropriate study of the validity of this method.

Fourth, several researchers have questioned the use of autobiographies in the research design as they are open-ended, subjective resources that are vulnerable to individual and personal interpretation. Falk et al. (2008), Miller (2008) and Nixon (2008) all agree that more research is required as the autobiographies used as the basis for Dabrowski's research needed 'more careful consideration'. Nixon (2008, p.214) adds that they should not be 'just naively taken at face

value'. It is interesting to note that, according to Dabrowski, only a small number of volunteers actually qualified for the highest levels of TPD — again a personal judgement made by Dabrowski himself. The written works of one of these 'volunteers', Saint-Exupéry, a French aviator and writer, were used as support for TPD even though the man had died in a plane crash in 1944. Piechowski (2008, p.47) claims, 'His [Saint-Exupery's] notebooks and letters had adequate material for a developmental analysis.' Piechowski's description of the material as being 'adequate' should be questioned, especially with respect to what this means in terms of validation of a theory, and in terms of triangulation of data from a deceased 'participant'.

Fifth, the studies were conducted using a small sample of the population in only one particular country. Even Dabrowski himself recognised the unfinished nature of his work. In the preface of his book, *Mental growth through positive disintegration*, Dabrowski (1970, p.XI) emphasises that 'while clinical studies are quite advanced, experimental research with regard to this theory has not yet progressed enough.' Thirty years later, O'Connor (2002, p.58; cf. Laycraft, 2009) clearly noted that, in the interim:

some research has been sporadically conducted in support for the theory's relevance to the gifted and talented. ... Supporters of the theory should consider enhancing their argument by providing further empirical data to strengthen the link between the theory and the life experiences of gifted individuals.

Pyryt (2008), too, quite correctly drew attention to the need for more research which, in particular, should include a broader range of the population and not just individuals identified to be gifted (or talented, depending on your definition) according to performance in a measure of IQ. Pyryt (2008, p.177) adds, 'It's somewhat surprising that so few studies have actually been conducted comparing gifted and average-ability individuals.' It therefore seems surprising that other researchers, at least in North America, have not yet taken up this challenge but appear to have adopted the TPD without question.

Lost in translation

While questioning the nature of the research supporting Dabrowski's theory, it is worth

reflecting on the accuracy of the translation of Dabrowski's writing from Polish into English, as some of the concepts, meanings of terms and nuances in language might not have survived the process. For example, Silverman (2008, p.158) explains that the direct translation of the Polish word 'nadpobudliwosc' is not 'over-excitability', as it has been commonly translated, but rather 'superstimulatability', a neurological term that refers to a 'strong reaction to stimuli'. The prefix 'super' creates a positive image, something to strive for, such as 'superstar', 'superfine', 'superintendent' or even 'super intelligent'. 'Overexcitability', on the other hand, tends to have a negative connotation, suggesting an extreme degree of reaction, irritation or response, which can be interpreted as almost an over-reaction that needs to be suppressed or perhaps even medicated.

Mendaglio (2008, p.xii) argues that slight changes in translation have not been a significant issue in the past, and that many other well-known, accepted theories were not written in English and also required translation. He explains that personality theories, such as those proposed by Adler, Freud and Rogers, are also known through secondary sources: various authors made the original presentations accessible to readers, often because they were in another language. Mika (2008), who is fluent in both English and Polish, has studied Dabrowski's original works in order to verify the translations, and has been able to gain further insights into his theory. However, some issues, including the use of 'overexcitability' instead of 'superstimulatability', still remain. At the least, an ethic of caution is warranted.

The TPD and its use with gifted children

In the fields of 'gifted education' and 'gifted counselling', the concept of *overexcitabilities* (often tritely abbreviated to OEs) is the most popular aspect of Dabrowski's work (Piechowski, 2002; see Appendix 2 for a brief explanation of the overexcitabilities). Overexcitability is closely related to TPD because, when excitation is 'beyond the norm', it is an expression of development potential. In the literature, the overexcitabilities are presented by many authors who appear not to have conducted any formal research in this area (this can be readily checked by using academic Internet search engines such as *Google Scholar*), and who simply repeat previously reported material, using the same

published works as references, with no apparent critical appraisal of the information given or of the research methods used.

In the 1970s, Piechowski developed an 'open-ended instrument', a 46-item Overexcitability Questionnaire (OEQ) that aimed to measure overexcitabilities to administer to 'gifted' students who attended a 'Research and Guidance Laboratory for Superior Students' (reported in Piechowski, 2008). The versions of the OEQ now more commonly used comprise 21 items (Piechowski, 2006) and 50 items (OEQ-II — Falk et al., 1999). The items were in fact derived from the 'expressions of overexcitability' purposively selected from the autobiographies and Verbal Stimuli survey used in the so-called validation of the Theory of Positive Disintegration. That is, the items that were used to validate the theory are then used to identify 'dimensions of inner growth', which does appear to be a somewhat circular argument, so indeed there should be no surprise that the OEQ gives the results that it does. It is also worth noting that the OEQ relies on self-reporting verbal responses, and involves no observation or measurement of actual overexcitability behaviours.

Here one might also question the extent to which a theory constructed to understand the affective development of adults is applicable to the affective development of young children and adolescents. Be that as it may, Silverman claims that, since the completion of Piechowski's original research in the 1970s, validity for the OEQ has accrued from studies of groups 'with known characteristics' (Silverman, 2008, p.163), and that this validity includes cross-cultural validity from studies outside North America (Falk et al., 2008, p.188). However, in all of these studies there are no data indicating what score would determine an individual to be 'overexcitable'. This is important for at least two reasons. First, it suggests that the foundation from which the OEQ was developed rests on quite shaky ground. Second, from its humble beginnings of identifying purported overexcitabilities in a particular group of gifted people, the OEQ developed into a measure of behaviours associated with giftedness (e.g. Falk et al., 2008, p.198), from which it evolved into 'a measure of a person's giftedness' (Silverman, 2008, p.162). That is, because the overexcitabilities 'permeate a gifted person's existence' (Daniels & Meckstroth, 2008, p.34),

giftedness, for some at least, has come to be conceived of in terms of the existence of overexcitabilities (as measured by one form or other of the OEQ), and this is a worry.

The Dabrowskian lens

The 'Dabrowskian lens', that is, applying Dabrowski's Theory of Positive Disintegration, is currently used by at least some educational counsellors in North America (see, e.g., Laycraft, 2011) and Europe (de Mink & van der Kaaij, pers. comm., August 2011; and, for both contexts, see also <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/dabrowskidiscussiongroup>) as a framework for facilitating student growth. Dabrowski's work, reflected in both the TPD and the associated construct of Overexcitabilities, has the potential to be more widely adopted as a model for understanding the affective development of gifted students. Given that current pedagogies and programs often rely on identifiable starting points for planning, teaching and personalising learning programs for students, off-the-shelf guidelines, frameworks and checklists, which enable easy identification and classification of students, are growing in popularity.

Therefore it would be apropos to remember that models for the identification of giftedness are usually recommended to be holistic in nature (see, e.g., Ariyaratne, Merrotsy & Smith, 2008). In particular, if the OEQ is used to identify some behaviours that may be associated with giftedness, it does need to be used in conjunction with a broad range of other quantitative and qualitative measures and indicators of achievement, ability, aptitude and potential. Equally, when using the OEQ, teachers and counsellors need to be clear about exactly what it is that is being measured or identified, and what the ramifications of this measurement or identification are for pedagogy and counselling.

Conclusion

The promotion of Dabrowski's TPD has certainly been fierce, successful and mostly unquestioned. Rightly or wrongly, its apparent applications have now spread into many other fields including philosophy, religion, literature and health care (Ackerman, 2009, p.91), and microbiology (Mihalik & Csermely, 2011). Much of this application has occurred with the general acceptance of a theory which seems to be, at second glance, a theory that could well be worth

closely scrutinising with a different, more objective lens. Here we have argued, at the least, that the TPD's applicability for identifying, understanding and counselling the gifted should be carefully questioned and that, until further independent, controlled and well-designed research has been conducted, it should be viewed as 'an interesting framework' to be used with caution.

As a final note, we would also like to draw attention to a theory of affective and moral development that pre-dated Dabrowski's work by about a century. In *Either/Or* (Kierkegaard, 1959, originally published in 1843) and *Stages on life's way* (Kierkegaard, 1988, originally published in 1845), Kierkegaard describes three stages of personal development, which he terms the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious. It is remarkable that no reference to Kierkegaard's work has been made by Dabrowski, Piechowski, Silverman, Mendaglio and other key commentators of Dabrowski's theory. Given the clear connection between Dabrowski's TPD and Kierkegaard's *Stages*, this is another aspect of the TPD that would be rewarded and, in our opinion, enriched by research.

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Appendix 1: Summary of Dabrowski's Levels of Development

Dabrowski's Theory of Positive Disintegration has five levels of development. These are summarised below (adapted from Mendaglio, 2008, pp.34–39):

Level 1 Primary Integration. This is a level characterised by self-interest and self-gratification. No transformations occur with any conflict or crises experienced.

Level 2 Unilevel Disintegration. This is triggered by onset of conflict, e.g. puberty, menopause, failures in school, work or relationships. Experiences include intense emotions such as anxiety, despair and frustration. Mental integration is loosened, often resulting in confusion and moodiness. Remaining at this level could lead to dire consequences, e.g. suicide. The person needs to move on to Level 3 or go back to Level 1.

Level 3 Spontaneous Multilevel Disintegration. This is crucial for advanced development and is dominated by disintegrating dynamisms. This

level is a quantum leap in development. Various forms of negative emotions and self-critical attitudes appear at this level, including feelings of shame and dissatisfaction, with lots of inner reflection, self-examination and self-evaluation. There is a greater awareness of how social and personal phenomena ought to be. *Inner psychic milieu* — the totality of dynamisms — begins here. This is the beginning of a hierarchy of values.

Level 4 Organised Multilevel Disintegration. At this level, there is a conscious control of development, characterised by the rise of developmental dynamisms such as autonomy, authenticity, self-education and social justice. It is the beginning of secondary integration. Individuals seek information on how to improve.

Level 5 Secondary Integration. This level is the 'the apex of human development' (Mendaglio, 2008, p.39) Personality is achieved. Individuals feel at peace and harmony with themselves. There is little inner conflict.

Three factors lead to development through the levels: the instinct to develop with individuals varying according to what they have inherited; social environment; and thirdly, an important dynamism, which occurs after other dynamisms have kicked in. This special dynamism is one where individuals become more self-determined, approach life in a highly moral way and live life consciously.

Dabrowski saw development as being:

- a) biologically determined — based on the life cycle of the human species through stages of birth, infancy, childhood, adolescence, adulthood and death and the adjustment to each of these stages;
- b) autonomous — individuals regulate their behaviours by conforming to personal values which often conflict with commonly accepted social norms; and
- c) one-sided — negative maladjustment, often egocentric and anti-social, regardless of the cost to others, as in criminality and paranoia (adapted from Mendaglio, 2008, p.23.)

Appendix 2: 'Overexcitabilities' / Superstimulatability

As Mendaglio (2007) explains: 'Overexcitability is a property of the central nervous system, which serves to enhance awareness of, and

responsiveness to, stimuli. ... Everyone has excitability but not everyone has overexcitability; people may be endowed with varying levels of each OE and those with high levels of all five forms will experience internal conflict.' This *internal conflict* is part of the positive disintegration process. There are five forms of overexcitability, briefly outlined in the table below (Mendaglio, 2008, pp.24–25):

Overexcitability	Related behaviours
Psychomotor	High energy levels, cannot sit still, generally restless
Sensual	High level of sensory perception; sensitive to sight, smell, taste, touch
Intellectual	Highly curious, high ability to analyse and synthesise, ask probing questions, love learning for its own sake
Imaginational	Ability to visualise, rich fantasy life, daydreamers, often creative
Emotional	Intensely emotionally sensitive, take things to heart, have a need for exclusive relationships, are empathically connected with people

Dabrowski believed the last three overexcitabilities were essential for advanced personality development.

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