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*Three Ways to Read Dąbrowski's Theory. It Is Not All Flat Here. Constructing a Neo-Dąbrowskian Approach*

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Trzy sposoby na odczytanie teorii Dąbrowskiego. Nie wszystko jest tu jasne. Konstruowanie podejścia neo-Dąbrowskiego

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes Dąbrowski's theory of positive disintegration referring to current debates in the USA which discussed certain parts of the theory (e.g. overexcitabilities) and neglected others (e.g. dynamisms). This approach caused simplification of the theoretical framework proposed by Dąbrowski and inscribed it into the narrow quantitative understanding of science. Lastly, Piechowski proposed to significantly modify Dąbrowski's theory and to even discard the two lowest levels of development in theory. This caused a reaction by Tillier and Mendaglio who tried to defend the original concepts of the author of the theory. This article juxtaposed these two interpretations of the theory and shows a third possible interpretation based on English and Polish texts written by Dąbrowski. This interpretation solved problems present in the previously mentioned approaches to the theory and shows the way forward into more systematized theoretical research which is seriously needed if we want to further develop theory and its main notions.

**Keywords:** positive disintegration; dynamisms; psychic energy; developmental potential; primary integration; primitive integration; unlevel disintegration

INTRODUCTION

In the last couple of decades a lot of research has been conducted in connection with the overexcitabilities, which are one of the parts of Kazimierz Dąbrowski's

theory. It was done in an attempt to create an instrument that could measure with the required scientific accuracy in which domains an individual is gifted and to help understand connections between different forms of overexcitabilities (Ackerman, 1997; Mendaglio & Tillier, 2006; Mendaglio, 2012; Bailey, 2010; Rinn & Reynolds, 2012; Alias et al., 2013).

I will not go into all the considerations that have been part of this debate here. In my opinion, there is an urgent need to focus on the other parts of the theory as well. The reason is obvious: the theory of positive disintegration represents an ambitious project aimed at explaining the complicated phenomenon of human development. Especially its accelerated form. What is lacking in the field is a rigorous theoretical debate on central components of Dąbrowski's theory, such as levels of development or specific dynamics. Certain terms in the theory, such as "developmental potential" or the "third factor", should be clarified and further theoretical research linked to their understanding. Focusing only on overexcitability is not beneficial to the development of the theory and blocks its further development. Central concepts and structure of the theory should be discussed or criticized if we do not want it to be forgotten. The purpose of my paper is to stimulate debate in the community interested in the theory of positive disintegration and to propose certain modifications to the theory that I believe will further its development.

It is not the aim of this article to give an overview of Dąbrowski's theory or to present certain aspects of it to the reader who is not familiar with it. There are already a few introductions to the theory (Ackerman, 2009; Daniels & Piechowski, 2008; Mendaglio, 2008a; Tillier, 2018; Chojnowski, 2021a, 2021b).

It is my hope that this article will provide a way out of the dogmatism and narrow understanding of the theory that I believe now dominates the field of gifted education.

#### THEORETICAL DILEMMAS ASSOCIATED WITH THE FIRST LEVEL OF POSITIVE DISINTEGRATION THEORY – PRIMITIVE/PRIMARY INTEGRATION

The first level of Dąbrowski's theory – primitive, primary integration – has been severely criticized by Michael Piechowski, Dąbrowski's long-time collaborator. He has a history of disagreements with the author of the theory in relation to the equation of Abraham H. Maslow's self-actualizing people with people who have reached a fourth level of development in Dąbrowski's theory – multilevel organized, systematized disintegration (Piechowski, 1985, pp. 91–128). Piechowski went so far as to make changes in the two books he co-authored with Dąbrowski without Dąbrowski's permission, including changing the title of the work to *Theory of Levels of Emotional Development* (Dąbrowski &

Piechowski, 1977) and correcting the subtitles. Self-actualization was presented as the goal of development, which was inconsistent with Dąbrowski's views on the subject (Dąbrowski & Piechowski 1977; Dąbrowski et al., 1977; Tillier, personal information added to the books).

According to Piechowski, this gives a stronger basis for Dąbrowski's theory. In 2014, he published an article in which he suggested deleting the first level from the theory because it allows for too much spectrum of diagnosis. For Piechowski, it is not possible that seventy percent of the population is on this level. He thinks that Dąbrowski's theory is still unfinished and we can propose various modifications to it. People should not start on this level, because there are only a few criminals on it. In his opinion, only extreme cases fall under Level I (Piechowski, 2002, 2008, 2014). It is true that at this level we can group together great psychopaths, small psychopaths, and average people, but as I show in my analysis, it is too far-reaching a solution to exclude this level from the theory.

Piechowski lists some mistakes that, in his opinion, researchers who study Dąbrowski's theory make: using terms like "phases" instead of "levels", not using the correct name for the theory but, for example, the "theory of emotional development", criticizing the disdain for the second level (but later he proposed to cut out the second level from the theory as well) (Piechowski, 2014, 2017). It is interesting to add that the core of his argument is to reject this level because it does not describe processes characteristic of positive disintegration. Individuals at this level do not have an inner psychic milieu and have very little or no developmental potential, therefore they cannot participate in accelerated development (Piechowski, 2017).

Immediately we see the weakness of this kind of argumentation: if the first level really allows for a great deal of differentiation, it is too early to decide that every individual at this level cannot reach any potential at all. It can be argued that some individuals can reach a certain level of development even if they remain at Level I. In a recent podcast, Elisabeth Mika suggested that the first level be called unilevel integration and the last fifth level multilevel integration (Mika, 2022). This is an interesting proposal that can make Dąbrowski's theory more coherent, but our acceptance of this line of interpretation depends on how we interpret the theory.

Piechowski wants to reevaluate Dąbrowski's theory because he believes that it cannot be maintained in its current form in the light of new scientific achievements. This argument has weak points because it is supported by certain controversial interpretations of Dąbrowski's theory. For example, Piechowski thinks that the transition from the first to the highest level is impossible, but this is not entirely true, as I will show in the later part of this article (Piechowski, 2009).

Piechowski claims that people are born as good, sensitive creatures and only later they develop certain pathological behaviors due to the bad environment they

live in. This claim is not understandable in the theoretical framework proposed by Dąbrowski. This kind of understanding of human beings is, I claim, closer to Maslow than to Dąbrowski. The author of the theory of positive disintegration is more original here because he claims that developing people are in the process of becoming persons and in the majority of cases gradually transform their inner psychic environment. Not all people are good from birth, at least not in the theoretical framework proposed by Dąbrowski. Small children are egoistic by nature, but they can develop empathy and other positive traits of their character (Dąbrowski, 1964b, pp. 7–41).

In contrast to Piechowski's theoretical position, Sal Mendaglio and William Tillier (2015) stated that Level I is an important part of Dąbrowski's theory and cannot be rejected on the grounds that development does not take place there. In their opinion, multilevelness and developmental potential are the main concepts of the theory. Poor socialization cannot be the only reason for the existence of emotionally retarded people such as psychopaths. They argue that hereditary factors are more important, and we cannot say that all pathological and socially destructive behavior is caused only by poor socialization. Based on my reading of Dąbrowski's work, I must say that their approach is closer to how Dąbrowski understands his theory (Dąbrowski, 1975, 1979b, 1979c, 2015).

There is also a third way of interpreting the theory, proposed by Maria Grzywak-Kaczyńska, a psychologist and friend of Dąbrowski. Her interpretation is closer to Tillier and Mendaglio's understanding of the theory, but sheds new light on some important theoretical problems. This interpretation is strongly supported by many texts of the author of the theory. In some of Dąbrowski's articles, for example, one from 1946 in *Mental Health Quarterly*, published in Polish, in which he often published, we can find similar statements about a young child.

If we look at the life of a child in its earlier periods, as well as at the life of many adult individuals, especially among the rural population, but not only among the rural population, we encounter relatively coherent structures with distinct, though usually not very rich, dispositions and aspirations, enclosed within the framework of the most ordinary needs of life and realizing them in a direct and relatively simple way. In the above cases, we can speak of periods of integration – *with reference to early childhood* – or of individuals with a permanently integrated structure, the development of which is mainly a consequence of the biological phases through which human life generally passes. (Dąbrowski, 1946, p. 45, author's translation and emphasis)

That the above argument is no exception is shown by another article in the same quarterly. Dąbrowski, referring to his first article cited above, states even more explicitly that the child initially manifests a strongly integrated mental structure.

[I]n the early periods of a child's life, in addition to that of adults with a primary structure, we are dealing with activities that are included in the framework of the most ordinary needs of life, with activities that are adapted to the narrow reality of the present. (Dąbrowski, 1949, p. 26, author's translation)

It is only later, as a result of disintegrative stimuli, that the plastic psyche of the child is generally loosened, which allows for the achievement of a higher level of emotional development combined with advanced intellectual functions and distinguishes the human psyche from the mental structure of animals. "Therefore, disintegration, in varying degrees, is encountered as a normal symptom in children (...) The tendency to disintegration, typical of a child, would not testify to abnormality, but to the plasticity and evolvability of the child's psyche" (Dąbrowski, 1948, p. 42, author's translation).

Disintegration in a child would occur naturally and gradually as a result of the loosening of his originally integrated mental structure as a consequence of contact with contradictory stimuli from the external environment, which on the one hand stimulate some of his senses in a pleasurable way, and on the other hand cause unpleasant or even painful sensations in others. Thus, the period of early childhood would generally be marked by a certain natural loosening and enrichment of the originally rigid mental structure, followed by its stabilization, which would naturally be repeated in adolescence.

When the child takes various objects into his mouth, he encounters a contradiction between the sense of olfactory and visual pleasure and the sense of gustatory and tactile annoyance. When the child comes into tactile contact with the desired sight of a candle flame, a conflict arises. More or less similar mechanisms arise in primitive man. (Dąbrowski, 1949, p. 38, author's translation)

In agreement with the above mentioned articles, Grzywak-Kaczyńska states that primary integration is present in its first phase in a young child. This theoretical position is very important because it is in strong opposition to Piechowski's position. It shows a completely different understanding of the theory that cannot be reconciled with his interpretation.

Some individuals consolidate this primary structure and develop only intelligence to saturate their innate drives. Others choose to activate higher emotions and dynamics and evolve through struggles and tensions to become fully developed personalities. This interpretation, I argue, is more consistent with Dąbrowski's theory than Piechowski's interpretations.

The first stage of primary integration is characterized by a lack of fragmentation of the innate, integrated psychic structure manifested by global cognitive-emotional-motor functions. It is characteristic of the young child. Some individuals have consolidated their integration of the primary structure and remain at this level, developing intelligence only as a tool to satisfy their innate drives. (Grzywak-Kaczyńska, 1979, p. 321, author's translation)

This approach can be confirmed by some of Dąbrowski's works. One of them is the above-mentioned article from *Mental Health Quarterly*. Elisabeth Mika also claims that this understanding can be derived from Dąbrowski's theory. In particular, one of his main works *Spoleczno-wychowawcza psychiatria dziecięca*

[*Socio-Educational Child Psychiatry*] (1964b), published only in Polish. She recalled two passages from this book that, in my opinion, are consistent with Dąbrowski's articles (Mika, 2015).

Thus, there is no doubt that Dąbrowski was guided by a certain vision of human development, in which the psyche changes as a result of the loosening of rigid mental structures. In order to develop, a person must disintegrate, and in individuals endowed with a certain developmental potential, disintegration processes occur already in childhood, which can be strengthened or weakened by the external environment. According to this interpretation, both early childhood and adolescence are processes in which the disintegration of the human psyche takes place in a kind of natural way, which can be more or less extensive. Some individuals retain the positive features of childhood, such as mental infantilism and mental plasticity, which implies the possibility of a later, deeper disintegration leading to the development of a full and harmonious personality.

### THREE POSSIBLE READINGS OF DĄBROWSKI'S WORKS. IT IS NOT ALL FLAT HERE

I argue that we can distinguish three different interpretations of the theory, or one could say three schools of thought that can be developed based on a different understanding of some aspects of Dąbrowski's theory.

The first interpretation is Piechowski's way of reading Dąbrowski's theory, which in my opinion is the furthest from the positions originally developed by the author of the theory. Piechowski claims that the environment plays a very important role in the development of individuals, and even if the developmental potential is inherited, this does not change the strong influence of the environment (Piechowski, 2008, pp. 54–55).

In Piechowski's interpretation, developmental potential is mostly irrelevant and is not understood as genetics. Thus, children are good by nature, and the environment plays the most important role in the realization of this potential. Piechowski also does not appreciate the importance of negative developmental potential. Therefore, the most important thing is not developmental potential, but a good upbringing (Piechowski, 2014, p. 13).

In Piechowski's way of reading the theory, the child is kind and sensitive, and the theory is about multilevel development, not one-level development. The first two levels are not about multilevel development, nor do they describe human development, so they can be removed from the theory. This argumentation is of course connected with the assumption that it is not possible to go from the first level of the theory to the highest level (Piechowski, 2014, p. 12).

Therefore, most people do not advance in development because of the harsh society we live in. Society can create hard conditions for development and favor

primitive conditions. Stage I is the result of the way society is. Therefore, in Piechowski's approach, primitive integration is not primarily caused by a lack of developmental potential, but by the conditions of the external environment in which we live. This can be read as a reduction of the gap between those who are gifted and those who are not (Piechowski, 2015, pp. 229–231).

### **1. Incongruities of Piechowski's approach**

Rejection or extreme reduction of the role of developmental potential in determining the scope of development of a given individual. Overemphasis on the second factor. On the one hand, this approach tries not to stigmatize anyone, but on the other hand, it rejects and flattens the transformational dimension of Dąbrowski's theory. The theory has been changed so much that it does not look like the theory of positive disintegration anymore, because disintegration is no longer its central point. It becomes a narrow theory of emotional development.

Another serious weakness of this interpretation is that it rejects those parts of Dąbrowski's theory that are more controversial, thus robbing the theory of its originality. The perfect example of this kind of rejection is negative emotions and the role they play in the development of the individual. The theory shows the importance of negative emotions and their energy in the development of the inner psychic milieu (Mendaglio, 2008b, pp. 15–16). Without them, inner transformations cannot be completed. In Dąbrowski's theory it is crucial to appreciate their role in development and not to try to erase them, but to use them in a constructive way. Piechowski's way of reading the theory completely misses this point. Later in my article, I will show why the second level of theory is crucial to preserving the character of theory.

Many of Piechowski's proposed changes simplify Dąbrowski's theory and make it more mainstream. They are probably good for the popularization of the theory of positive disintegration, but after cutting off two first levels it is no longer Dąbrowski's theory, it is no longer about disintegration and high tension experiences that can gradually lead to higher emotions and values. It is a narrow theory about gifted people who are by definition deprived of part of the most interesting insights of Dąbrowski (Piechowski, 1993, 2008, 2009, 2014, 2015, 2017).

The second interpretation of the theory, whose main authors are Mendaglio and Tillier (2015), and Grzywak-Kaczyńska (1975, 1979), presents radically different approaches to the first two levels of Dąbrowski's theory. It is important to point out that they probably do not agree with everything that Grzywak-Kaczyńska says, but I think it is still possible to show how their interpretation, combined with Grzywak-Kaczyńska's interpretation, forms a theoretically vivid approach.

In this second interpretation of Dąbrowski's theory, heredity is the most important factor determining the developmental potential of each individual.

The first stage is not entirely a phase and not entirely a stage. It occurs naturally at a certain moment in a young child who does not have time to develop an extensive mental structure, so at a certain moment in our lives we are all at this level. Some of us stay at that level, some of us go beyond it. Therefore, the correct name for this level is primary integration, because at some point in our lives we are all at this level (Grzywak-Kaczyńska, 1975, p. 55).

The main problem is how to understand the developmental potential in this approach. We know that it is hereditary, but if the first stage is in some way similar to the biological stage, then we must assume that some individuals are stopped at this stage of development without awakening their potential. It causes some problems if the majority of people are inhibited at this level, we have to differentiate between those who do not have enough developmental potential to loosen rigid mental structures of the primary integrated psyche and we also have a group of people who have developmental potential but do not activate it! So it is possible to go through all levels of development in the theory of positive disintegration, but it depends on the individual whether he or she tries to do it or chooses to withdraw from intensive developmental tension.

It is a rather pessimistic way of understanding the theory (from a certain perspective), because we assume that the majority of people in their normal development at certain points in their lives are at the first level of Dąbrowski's theory. This kind of interpretation makes it doubtful whether the first level of the theory is really a level or a phase.

## 2. Partial conclusions

Piechowski makes a step in a good direction when he suggests in his later published paper that the first three levels can be understood as types of development. The third type of development continues on the two highest levels. This solution is not sufficient and does not resolve all the contradictions, but it is better than rejecting the first two levels of the theory (Piechowski, 2017, p. 94).

In his interpretation Piechowski avoids the problem of the mental awakening of the inner psychic milieu. He does this because if he admits that some form of awakening is needed and that it happens between the first and second levels of development, it invalidates his interpretation of the theory. In his interpretation, the inner psychic milieu is already present in individuals who have a sufficient amount of developmental potential. It is already there, so there is no need to awaken it. This is the hidden core of his argument. The problem with this interpretation is that it really flattens Dąbrowski's theory and makes inner transformation, which creates higher values and emotions, unlikely.

Great individuals sometimes commit suicide because of the inner struggles and tensions they experience, which shows that even individuals with great developmental potential must go through certain developmental difficulties. The assumption that they are already at the third level – multilevel spontaneous disintegration – just does not add up (Piechowski, 2017).

Any modification of the theory that erases Level I is based on the assumption that it does not describe development through positive disintegration, but is simply a zero point. If we acknowledge the second interpretation and its assumptions, we cannot reject Level I because it represents an important part of human development and shows why some people stay at this level and some do not.

### THE THIRD WAY (MY INTERPRETATION OF THE THEORY)

I argue that we can identify two different types of development and a third type of non-developmental, prodestructive “change” that can be very strictly compared to development.

The first type of development concerns exceptional and vulnerable individuals analyzed by Dąbrowski. It is a development through an inner pattern, around which the theory of positive disintegration is concentrated. This type of development is characteristic of individuals who are endowed with great developmental potential. They are a relatively small part of the society.

The second type of development proceeds according to an external pattern, i.e. social influence, and concerns the vast majority of society. The developmental potential present in the second type of development can be described as average in the statistical sense.

This introduction of two types of development allows us to show that there are some people who do not develop in an accelerated way, but who are also capable of some development. Accelerated development in the theory of positive disintegration leads to internal transformation – the extraordinary emergence of the new self. This process creates a new hierarchy of values and goals that represent the individual essence of the person.

I propose to introduce a distinction between the cumulative development method and the transformational development method in the theory of positive disintegration. It allows for the recognition that there are individuals who can develop, but on the basis of different patterns.

The first type of development is characteristic of transformative individuals who, under favorable conditions, can lead the whole society on the path of accelerated development. Dąbrowski called this mechanism *positive infection* (Dąbrowski, 1979a). Thanks to the mechanism of positive infection, it is possible for such individuals to spread higher values and emotions to the rest of society.

The second type of development is characteristic of average individuals who are susceptible to the influence of the social environment. This type of development is more common than the first, but can also lead to valuable social work.

The third type of non-developmental, prodestructive “change” is characteristic of prodestructive individuals (psychopaths, emotionally inferior). It is a special form of mutilated “development” based only on a simple profit and loss calculation. This type of psychic structure is focused only on the saturation of their inner drives. These drives are at the low intra-instinctual level. The instinct for self-preservation and the instinct for the preservation of the species play a dominant role here, and even the high intellect is completely subordinated to the basic drives.

Prodestructive individuals influence the rest of society and appear attractive due to their high intelligence, self-confidence, and personal charm. So, we can basically say that they lead society to more primitive, even instinctive “values” and goals, which are non-developmental and can cause war or genocide.

The cumulative method of development is slower and relies on the gradual accumulation of knowledge and learning, and disintegrative periods, if any, are rather weak. This method is accessible to average people. They can develop themselves, but this development is based on self-improvement rather than inner transformation. If the environment in which such individuals live has high moral standards, they will be inclined towards them. If not, they may gravitate toward strong men or other movements that have emotional appeal for them.

This shows that it is possible to connect Dąbrowski’s theory with the theoretical studies describing the authoritarian personality. It is still the unused potential of the theory. Mainly because most of the authors focus on the positivist quantitative approach, which can have an aura of scientific objectivity, but is non-developmental in its nature. There is a serious lack of more theoretical studies analyzing different places of Dąbrowski’s theory in search of new inspirations and theoretical developments. I suppose this is caused by the American way of studying theory, which does not appreciate the Western philosophical tradition of thought, which is a serious mistake, because Dąbrowski appreciated this tradition and based his theory on it (Dąbrowski, 1989b), so ignoring it and trying to inscribe his theoretical thought into the rigid and narrow neo-positivist American tradition does more harm than good.

We see that in the second type of development, which is characterized by the cumulative method, environmental factors are of the utmost importance. Such an interpretation allows us to solve the “problem” of excessive elitism in the theory and allows us not to stigmatize average individuals.

Criticism of the theory has often been linked to the assertion that it is impossible for the majority of society to be at the level of primitive integration and unable to evolve. The introduction of the cumulative method of development

makes it possible for a part of the I Level population to be a valuable part of society. They develop mainly quantitatively and on the basis of the influence of the external environment, but nevertheless it is possible for them, under good conditions, to achieve a kind of stabilization on the upper layer of primary integration. The most important for the development of this type of people is the quality of a given society and the norms and values that are a part of it. These norms and values create manners characteristic for the society. If these values are high, the average individual will tend to the upper zone of Level I. If primitive principles and norms, conducive to the development of primitive drives and desires, prevailed in society, this group will tend to the lower stratum of Level I. In modern market societies, with their ideology of success and profit over everything, psychopathization of this group takes place (Dąbrowski, 1989a, pp. 90–91).

### **Consequences for Dąbrowski's theory**

A certain scope of development is possible on the first level of development. There are different types of development: one described by Dąbrowski: transformative, and the second: cumulative – my proposal. At the first level, we have to distinguish between two mental structures. The result is that there are two groups of people: prodestructive individuals, who cannot develop themselves, and average individuals, who can.

#### **TWO KINDS OF UNDERSTANDING OF DEVELOPMENTAL POTENTIAL**

The first – Piechowski's understanding: not enough developmental potential – no inner transformation. Therefore, two first levels are not necessary because there is no development here. This interpretation is the least compatible with the spirit of Dąbrowski's theory.

The second (contributors Mendaglio, Tillier, Grzywak-Kaczyńska): moderate developmental potential can be present, but it does not mean that it is automatically realized.

Strong developmental potential must be realized or the person goes mad or commits suicide. It can be suppressed, and some individuals may unconsciously avoid the effort of realizing it. This interpretation is well rooted in the Polish and English texts of Dąbrowski. Of course, there are also fragments that emphasize that if the developmental potential is really high, it will be hard to stop, but there is no part that says that it happens automatically. There are also many cases of people with high developmental potential committing suicide or experiencing negative or chronic disintegration.

### **Updating the concept of developmental potential**

In Piechowski's interpretation, developmental potential is less important than the social environment and upbringing. For me, the environment is important, especially in cases where developmental potential is weak, but not the other way around.

I propose that Level I can exemplify alternative developmental pathways. I assume that the average individual in the population is endowed with enough developmental potential to be a valuable member of the community.

Of course, this does not mean that every average individual will be a valuable member of society. It depends on the environmental conditions in which he grew up. The amount of developmental potential varies in this group, but excluding minor and major psychopaths and individuals with strong psychopathic tendencies, we can safely assume that a large portion of the Level I population has more than zero developmental potential, which allows for some, albeit very limited, psychic growth.

My second hypothesis is that gifted individuals have a surplus of developmental potential that allows them to accelerate their development. This surplus manifests itself in mental disorders such as neuroses and psychoneuroses.

Developmental potential does not consist only of overexcitability, but also of the interests and abilities of a given individual. Dynamisms are manifestations of the developmental potential. Such dynamisms as feeling inferior to oneself are even more important than overexcitabilities.

I would like to emphasize that this change is very important because it is connected with the concept of psychic energy – derived from Dąbrowski's texts – introduced later in this article.

In short – you have a surplus of psychic energy, which is the “fuel” that makes accelerated development possible, but does not determine it (possibility of one-sided development). Without this surplus it is not possible to develop oneself in the way described by Dąbrowski's theory. Transformation needs fuel, and this fuel comes from psychic energy, which comes from transformed instincts, which are transformed under the influence of higher emotions and values. Individuals who are in the process of positive disintegration must gain access to this psychic energy and/or learn how to use it. The process of transformation is gradual and involves conflict, tension, etc. It is painful, but a person gradually learns how to control this newly built inner psychic environment, and thanks to this he/she also learns how to use certain dynamisms and energies that come with it. Higher emotions and values are like signposts that show the way forward in mental development.

The amount of one's own developmental potential that an individual possesses is hereditary, which means that people differ from one another in the amount of libidinal force with which they come to life. Some of them do not have certain

qualities and cannot generate enough psychic energy to transform their psychic structure.

This interpretation is “dogmatic” because some individuals are able to develop themselves through all levels. It is possible and even plausible for some individuals to progress through all the levels described by Dąbrowski’s theory. It is also more inclusive because it allows more people to reach a higher level of development and recognizes the differences between gifted and non-gifted individuals. It is important to add that this does not mean that all people can reach a higher level of development. It just means that a large group of people can be good citizens, but not all of them will be gifted. They can acquire certain skills and abilities based on social norms, but they cannot develop in the way described by Dąbrowski.

## THE PLACE OF PSYCHIC ENERGY IN DĄBROWSKI’S THEORY. PART ONE

Dąbrowski often used the notion of psychic energy in his dissertation on psychology (promoted in 1931, published in 1934). He also used this notion in his later works and did not operationalize it:

It may be assumed that the mechanism of these processes is similar to that of compulsions. The mental restlessness, increased by autosuggestion, *when seeking release*, takes the path indicated by the *intention* and in this way releases the accumulated *psychic energy*. (Dąbrowski, 1934, p. 17, author’s translation and emphasis, old translation corrected)

This notion is present in almost all of Dąbrowski’s most important works. It is not elaborated, but used to describe certain processes present in the theory of positive disintegration. If we approach the theory from this point of view, we can almost certainly make it more understandable. Psychic energy cannot replace dynamism, it can only function in the theory as a complementary term that allows for a fuller understanding of the changes that take place on the second level of the theory.

### Exemplary quotes

I have already indicated how important for pedagogy is the principle that in the development of an individual, the activities of stimulating and strengthening the *energy* on one level must go hand in hand with inhibiting, weakening, denial of stimulations at a lower level. The theory of compensation and sublimation finds its ally in the theory of positive disintegration. (Dąbrowski, 1964a, pp. 235–236, author’s translation and emphasis)

The third factor strives, relying on the disposing and directing center on higher level and the personality ideal, to weaken the lower levels of the inner environment and to *transform energy*

obtained from the inhibitions of many lower dynamism *into sublime energy*. (Dąbrowski, 1958, p. 117, author's translation and emphasis)

In conclusion: the personality ideal determines the dynamic assessment of the values towards which the individual directs his *various psychic energies*. The disposing and directing center on a higher level is the center of structure and dynamisms of the developing personality. (Dąbrowski, 1979c, pp. 48–49, author's translation and emphasis)

## THE PLACE OF PSYCHIC ENERGY IN DĄBROWSKI'S THEORY. PART TWO

In his bibliography of the dissertation (Dąbrowski, 1934, p. 97), Dąbrowski mentions *Psychological Types* (1921) by Carl Gustav Jung. He does not refer to Jung's earlier work – *Psychology of the Unconscious* (1916), republished and revised as *Symbols of Transformation* (1956), in which he included his modified concept of libido as psychic energy (Jung, 1998, pp. 173–181).

We cannot be sure whether Dąbrowski was familiar with Jung's unmentioned work. We only know that he uses the notion of psychic energy and does not describe what he understands by it. I find that this term can be elaborated in order to describe the theory in a more complete way. I argue that the notion of psychic energy is inherent in Dąbrowski's theory of positive disintegration and can be used to better understand inner transformation in connection with the construct of dynamism.

It may also be interesting to think of developmental potential as a certain amount of energy that is assigned to each person from birth to death. It is important to think carefully about the consequences of such an adjustment. If used only in a complementary way, it can make the theory more coherent, but on the other hand, it can be used by some people in a way that leads to an oversimplification of the theory. It is interesting to add that these mental illnesses, in this interpretation of the theory, are manifestations of surplus psychic energy. Some of them can be gradually transformed and make a human self-updating and self-realizing person. Some of them can be distorted and make a person truly unhappy and isolated.

Of course, an approach that puts energy at the center of the theory concerns a certain interpretation of dynamisms. Certainly, we can think of mental illnesses as certain potentials that cannot be controlled by an individual at the moment. These often negative emotions, extreme in their nature, can be used as fuel for development. We can think of mental illnesses as certain computer programs without drivers. Dynamisms are such drivers that allow an individual to control this distorted psychic energy that is taking the form of a mental illness. Of course, this takes time: the first individual does it partially and then transforms completely, reaching a new level of functioning.

### **A place of emotions in Dąbrowski's theory**

Out of these three [emotional, imaginative and intellectual], *I put enhanced emotional excitability in the first place* due to its fundamental role in the visionary and also intuitive conjugated cognition (objective-subjective), due to its essential participation in higher forms of thinking conjugated with higher feelings, due to its role in the emergence and development of empathy and in the overall psychological development of the human being. (Dąbrowski, 1981, pp. 104–105, author's translation and emphasis)

It is an interesting quote that shows why Dąbrowski's theory puts so much emphasis on the role of emotions in human development. Authentic development takes place in different dimensions than intellectual inquiry. Higher emotions and values determine our actions in life.

### **WHY UNILEVEL DISINTEGRATION IS CENTRAL TO UNDERSTANDING DĄBROWSKI'S THEORY**

Making energy a central notion shows why unilevel disintegration is the most important level in the theory. At this level, enormous amounts of psychic energy are activated and used for inner psychic transformation. I would argue that this is precisely the activation of an individual's developmental potential that occurs at this level.

It is a big mistake to treat the second level as unimportant and non-developmental and to propose to exclude it from the theory, as Piechowski (2014) suggested. It is a crucial level for Dąbrowski's theory, without which the theory loses its unique character. It is Dąbrowski's conviction that without high psychic tension, inner conflicts and disturbance of homeostasis, mental growth cannot take place. People are not born as multilevel persons, it takes a lot of work to reach a certain level of development. The psychic energy has to be activated, and in order to do this, a destructive dynamism has to break down the previous mental structures and build up new ones (Mendaglio, 2017). This is an activation of the developmental potential without which we cannot develop ourselves. Without the activation of the inner psychic milieu, it is not possible to reach a higher level of development. This is exactly why Dąbrowski claims that a stressful environment with hard conditions can stimulate growth.

It is true that there are rare examples of individuals who begin their development from a high starting level, but these are the exceptions that prove the rule. If you do not activate your inner psychic milieu, you cannot discover your own hierarchy of values and goals in life. The tension plays here a double role: disintegrative and developmental – it is a stimulus in shaping a new self-image. “The transition from level 2 to level 3 involves a fundamental shift that requires a phenomenal amount of energy. This period is the crossroads of development: from here one must either progress or regress” (Tillier, 2002, p. 7).

The disintegration of rigid mental structures allows for mental growth. The tension experienced at this level of theory is necessary. The construction of a new self requires this period of mental struggle. The individual can withdraw from the developmental effort or move forward and achieve a higher level of development.

### PARTIAL CONCLUSIONS – LEVEL II

Dąbrowski's theory is not only about multilevel development and outstanding personalities, but it is also about the process that leads to the attainment of a higher level.

The developmental potential requires activation and awakening and it takes place on the second level of positive disintegration. The amount and strength of the disintegrations experienced by an individual are not always the same, but the inner struggle is always present, because without it, psychic energy is not generated and new dynamisms are not developed. The process of development is as important as multilevelness. We can have developmental potential, but sometimes we do not fulfill it because we are afraid of the mental pain that comes with its realization. For example, escaping into alcohol and drugs.

Level II is of primary importance here. It is so important because it fundamentally changes the psychic structure of an individual and allows him to activate his inner forces and inner psychic milieu. The inner struggle is necessary for this process because it leads to the generation of enormous amounts of psychic energy and the development of new dynamisms.

### GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

The theory of positive disintegration is open to a wide range of interpretations. In this sense, it is still an unfinished project.

Much depends on which fragments of Dąbrowski's Polish and English texts we focus on. I argue that familiarity with Dąbrowski's native language is of primary importance for understanding the full context of his theory. Familiarity with English texts gives only a partial understanding of the theory. Emphasizing some hypotheses and focusing less on the other aspects of the theory leads to different interpretations. It is a long-awaited moment for every intellectual creator of the theory when his successors achieve intellectual maturity and are able to propose their interpretation of certain concepts.

In this article I cover only a part of my research. I try to preserve the original character of the theory as much as possible and propose some modifications that I hope will shed some light on important constructs from which it is composed. I argue that this interpretation is connected with the spirit of Dąbrowski's theory. It only complements the approach of the theory to so-called average people and

complements some other key concepts of the theory in a way that is deduced on the basis of Dąbrowski's books and articles. I think that the life and death of certain theories is decided by the discussion about them. I do not support dogmatism and carelessness in interpreting Dąbrowski's theory. The most important characteristic of a true scholar, which I believe Dąbrowski was, is openness to new interpretations and challenges that arise from serious theoretical debates about his theory of positive disintegration.

Finally, I would like to say that I believe that Dąbrowski's theory still has untapped potential and can be linked to a critical approach to education. Dąbrowski was very critical of certain features of modern societies. He strongly criticized the American society and its idols. He believed in an alternative humanistic education that would create individuals capable of thinking independently and not conforming to the rest of society (Rankel, 2008). I believe that we can apply Dąbrowski's theory to a critical approach to education. Dąbrowski's theory in itself combines a deep critique of modern societies with humanistic psychology. We can use Dąbrowski to criticize neoliberal societies and neoliberal education.

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## ABSTRAKT

W artykule analizie poddana została teoria dezintegracji pozytywnej Dąbrowskiego z jednoczesnym nawiązaniem do toczących się w USA debat, w których dyskutowano na temat pewnych części teorii (np. nadpobudliwości), a pomijano inne (np. dynamizmy). Takie podejście spowodowało uproszczenie teoretycznej struktury zaproponowanej przez Dąbrowskiego i wpisało ją w wąskie ilościowe rozumienie nauki. Ostatnio Piechowski zaproponował poważną modyfikację teorii Dąbrowskiego, a nawet odrzucenie dwóch najniższych poziomów rozwoju w teorii. Wywołało to reakcję Tilliera i Mendaglio, którzy próbowali bronić oryginalnych koncepcji autora teorii. W artykule zestawiono te dwie interpretacje teorii i zaprezentowano trzecią możliwą interpretację na podstawie badań nad angielskimi i polskimi tekstami Dąbrowskiego. Interpretacja ta rozwiązuje problemy obecne we wcześniej wymienionych podejściach do teorii oraz pokazuje drogę do bardziej usystematyzowanych badań teoretycznych, które są bardzo potrzebne, jeśli chcemy dalej rozwijać teorię i jej główne pojęcia.

**Słowa kluczowe:** dezintegracja pozytywna; dynamizmy; energia psychiczna; potencjał rozwoju; integracja pierwotna; integracja prymitywna; dezintegracja jednopoziomowa