

# the child's self-differentiation as influenced by family transactions

by  
Chrisoula P. Melissa

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## I. Introduction

### *The Family from the Viewpoint of General Systems Theory*

From the viewpoint of general systems theory, the family can be seen as a social system. Von Bertalanffy (1968) defined a system as a complex of elements in mutual interaction. According to Vassiliou (1973):

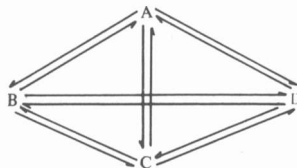
The term «interaction» implies a reciprocal, bilateral influence of processes which is limited in duration and in latitude. «Transaction» is a term implying that two processes are in a reciprocal, bilateral interchange according to which process A changes process B while simultaneously is changed by B (p. 8).

Every system has a boundary which distinguishes the relationships between the parts of the system from the relationships of these parts to other systems. There are non-living systems, such as our solar system, and living systems, such as plants, animals, and human beings. All living systems are organized in a hierarchy extending from lower-level systems (that is, systems with a simple organization in their structure, such as cells, organs, and organisms) to higher-level systems, systems with an organized complexity, such as groups, organizations, and societies (Coleman, 1969).

There are two kinds of systems: open systems and closed systems. All living systems are open; that is, they exchange materials and information with their environment. The system is functioning if it can maintain certain kinds of transactions, which require the processing of matter-energy and information, with its surroundings. In closed systems, however, no material enters or leaves the system (Bertalanffy, 1968).

According to Vassiliou (1976), Anthropos (the human being) is conceptualized as a biopsychosocial system, within the boundaries of which biological, psychosocial, sociocultural, and economicosocial processes transact.

A process is a sequence of events which develop continuously in the space-time continuum... A number of processes, «dynamic entities» which are interrelated, interdependent and transacting comprise a whole which is termed «system». The simplest model of a system is the following (p. 2):



In the above schema there are four transacting processes and twelve channels of multilateral transactions. When there is an increase in the number of transacting processes, there is also an increase in the channels of transaction, multilaterally, which, in turn, results to the «spiralling» of the system (the process of moving in a spiral way, the positive direction of the spiral is referred as anotropy or negentropy, and it leads to further organization of the system, while the negative direction as entropy, and it leads to the disorganization of the system) to an increasingly organized complexity. This process is called «morphogenesis» (Vassiliou, 1976).

Anthropos as a system is hierarchically organized and in dynamic interaction with its suprasystems: man's primary and secondary group, his community, society and humanity, at large (Figure 1). Every system, on each level of the hierarchy can act as a whole, and in order to function properly, it has to maintain openness in organization and organization in openness.

In Figure 1, each system establishes relations characterized by organized complexity within the boundaries of its suprasystem. The system is functioning, because «within the boundaries of its suprasystem, the system enters an interrelationship, interdependence and transaction with other systems» (Vassiliou 1976, p. 3). Facing downwards one can see the various subsystems or parts, while facing upwards one can see the suprasystems. Thus, it depends upon the level on which one is focusing to define which is the subsystem and which is the suprasystem. According to Vassiliou (1976):

Whatever presents a lesser degree of organized complexity and is included within the boundaries of the system is called the subsystem. Whatever presents a greater degree of organized complexity and includes within its boundaries a number of systems is called a suprasystem (p. 3).

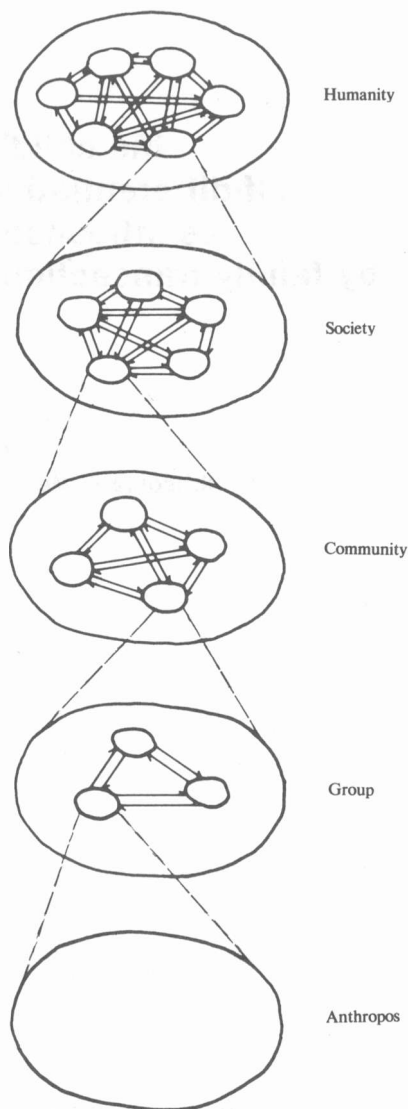
According to general systems theory, one cannot study only parts and processes in isolation, but must view a system as an entity by studying its organization and its order, which results from the dynamic interaction of its parts. Consequently, we cannot study the child's self-differentiation in a vacuum, but in the context of his family system.

#### *Self-differentiation in the Family System*

Self-differentiation deals with how man behaves in his interactions with others. It can be seen as a psychosocial process that starts from the time the child is born. Vassiliou (1976) stated that any

... psychosocial process is integral in its oneness. The intra or interpersonal aspects which it occasionally presents are created by the fact that the observer chooses to observe phenomena from different

FIGURE 1. *The Hierarchical Levels of the System Anthropos*  
(Vassiliou, 1976)



points of the timespace continuum. It is in this manner that the dichotomy between «intrapersonal» or «interpersonal» has been quite artificially created (p. 4).

According to the above statement, differentiation from one's self cannot be distinguished from one's differentiation from others. Thus, the child's self-differentiation will be perceived as one process, primarily taking place in his family, and later in any other group, as group or family members transact and they become interrelated and interdependent.

As the child grows up in a family, he becomes cognitively differentiated, that is, he starts to think, he begins to form the concepts of «I» and «We», he learns to establish his values and goals. At the same time he becomes emotionally differentiated, as he gradually acquires an increasing ability to identify his own feelings, and to utilize them as points of reference.

The development of the child's emotional and cognitive differentiation requires the existence of highly differentiated self boundaries which result from the spontaneous interplay between Feeling and Thinking. According to Vassiliou (in preparation):

Feeling will provide the flow, Thinking will give identity and direction to Feeling. The latter in turn will keep Thinking flexible, dynamic and creative, ready to reach novel, original associations by assimilating new information.

When the child is functioning as an open system, with clear and flexible boundaries, this transaction of Feeling and Thinking will result in (a) continuous emotional differentiating, (b) cognitive differentiation, (c) the structuring of the self, and (d) the maintenance of contact with reality.

As the child becomes more emotionally and cognitively differentiated, he acquires more differentiated patterns of transaction. Because this differentiation takes place as the child participates in the family and other group transactions, Vassiliou (1976) concluded:

...that there is one condition for differentiation and the spiralling of anthropos to increasingly organized complexity: to remain inseparably a member of a group... «Anthropos» and «group member» are two aspects of the same process... the human being is social and society is human (p. 4).

## II. statement of the problem

This paper will focus on family context and examine how various parent-child transactions may influence the child's self-differentiation. The important role the family plays in the development of the child's self-differentiation is stated by L'Abate (1976):

...personality development and self-differentiation in the family is as much a function of the individual as it is of the family of which he is a member (p. 105).

The child's self-differentiation occurs within the family as he transacts with the other family members. If these members allow the child to develop as an autonomous human being, by giving him the freedom to be himself and by allowing him to become aware of his similarities and differences from them, his self-differentiation is fostered. If, however, they limit the child's transaction by making only few allowances for similarities and differences with them, they do not help the child differentiate himself as an autonomous individual.

### *Basic Assumptions*

The basic assumptions of the study can be summarized as follows:

1. Self-differentiation is an important process whereby the child learns how to relate and interact with others.
2. The child becomes differentiated as he transacts in the family context.
3. Family transactions can enhance or inhibit the child's self-differentiation.
4. The child's self-differentiation is fostered in a family where he can maintain charge and control of his feelings, thoughts, and actions while transacting with the other family members.
5. Families with patterns of transaction that do not allow the child to grow as an autonomous human being impede his self-differentiation.
6. Disturbed families, that is families that cannot maintain openness in organization and organization in openness, tend to establish either autistic—extremely opposite—patterns or symbiotic—extremely similar—patterns of transaction. As a result, the child cannot acquire a differentiation in his feelings, thoughts, and transactions because he hasn't learned to distinguish how he differs from and how he resembles others, and thus, to relate with them accordingly.

### *Implications and Significance of the Problem*

How differentiated a man is or becomes has many implications in all aspects of his life, such as his mate selection, in the raising of his children, and in his dealing with everyday life stresses. A differentiated individual is more able to appreciate and enjoy his differences and similarities with others. On the contrary, the undifferentiated individual may see difference as oppositeness. Consequently, he may distance himself further from those who are not like him, or he may see himself as so similar to the other person that, finally, he loses his individuality. That is, he cannot be himself and assert himself. Less differentiated individuals tend to de-

pend more on their environment than on themselves, they do not take responsibility for their actions, and they do not feel the need to change themselves, or the existing status-quo.

According to L'Abate (1976), the child's self-differentiation is closely related to, or in a way reflects, the differentiation of his parents. «The children become as differentiated as their parents allow them or train them to be» (p. 106). Dyk and Witkin (cited in L'Abate, 1976) concluded that less differentiated boys tend to have less differentiated mothers. Coral (cited in L'Abate, 1976) indicated that less differentiated girls tend to have less differentiated fathers. Lewis and Landis (as cited in L'Abate, 1976) indicated that undifferentiated mothers establish symbiotic relationships with their children and in the absence of the mother, children react with panic.

By studying the influence of family transactions on the child's self-differentiation, we may be able to identify those transactions that inhibit the child's differentiation. We may then investigate ways to replace these transactions with new and more effective patterns of transaction. This investigation has significance for the family therapy approach which intervenes upon the family system as a whole, and helps the family members to create new ways of transacting. To implement this goal, prevention programs in the community have been established to foster the healthy development of the family. Finally, the family can preserve its growth and development if there is an early intervention with the problems it might face in a crisis period.

### III. review of the literature

#### *The Effect of Family Organization on Members' Communication*

Ackerman (1966) used the term «family organism» to refer to the family's qualities of living processes and its ability to function as a unit. This means that the family as a unit has a natural life history of its own which starts with a period of germination, growth and development, and ends with the passing of the old family and the creation of new ones. As the family goes through the various stages of development, it is important that it changes its structure according to its needs. One structure is needed when the family has young children, another when they mature, and still another when they go away. A healthy family can maintain its healthy adaptation with an optimal balance between continuity of the old and openness to new experiences. Thus, according to the way a family operates it can be seen as a unit of growth and experience, of fulfillment and failure, of health and illness.

Family members operate independently on their own level and interdependently on the family level. The

behavior of the family as a social system is characterized by wholeness; that is, the behavior of one family member is related to and dependent upon the behavior of all other members. Any change in one member will affect all the other members of his family (Watzlawick, 1967).

As family members interact and they exchange messages, they communicate. In 1951, Bateson postulated that:

Every message (communication bit) has both a content (report) and relationship (command) aspect; the former conveys information about facts, opinions, feelings, experience, etc., and the latter defines the nature of the relationship between the communicants (p. 31).

In the process of family communication, each member tries to define the nature of his relationship with the others.

There are two patterns of relationship: symmetrical and complementary. In the context of a symmetrical relationship, family members exchange the same patterns of behavior and try to maintain equality by minimizing their differences. This type of relationship allows for mutual respect, trust, and spontaneity. Family members are equal in their mutual respect, even though they respect each other for their undeniable difference as separate individuals in their own rights. Some of the dangers of this relationship are that it can lead to competitiveness, to an excessive concern for one's own rights and the other's duties, or to rejection of members who try to be different. In a complementary relationship, on the other hand, the behavior of one family member presupposes that of the other's behavior, and vice versa. Thus, in this relationship, inequality and maximization of difference are emphasized. One family member can complement the other and thus one can compensate for the other's weaknesses. But one can also prevent the other from changing—for example to become stronger or more assertive and self-secure—because this would make them equals and threaten their relationship. Conflicts arise when one family member tries to define its relationship as symmetrical and the other as complementary, or vice versa (Watzlawick, 1963).

The way a family is going to define its relationships is affected by the organization of its structure. Families with an open and flexible structure can change and adapt their relationships to the growth of their members. Such families can also shift from a symmetrical to a complementary relationship, or vice versa, in order to avoid the negative aspects of the relationship and to profit from its positive ones, according to the demands of family circumstances. Families with a rigid (closed) organization refuse to make this shift in their relationship. The members define their relationship as either symmetrical or complementary and they limit

themselves to that definition, without processing any other information about themselves and others in order to differentiate themselves, and to change and grow.

*The Influence of Family Transactions  
on the Child's Self-differentiation*

In the Mental Research Institute, Palo Alto, California, Don D. Jackson, John H. Weakland, Paul Watzlawick, Virginia Satir and Jay Haley were a research group—initially under the direction of Gregory Bateson—that has studied and worked extensively with families over the past twenty years. One of the basic findings of this group is that each family has its own characteristic patterns of behavior and ways of communicating and interacting to maintain itself and reach its goals. The family system is governed by a number of rules according to which the members interact in an organized and repetitive manner. With certain continuous and dynamic self-regulatory processes, called homeostatic mechanism, the family tries to maintain a steady state within an open system (Jackson, 1977).

Jackson (1967) observed that families with schizophrenic children have very few patterns of transaction and these patterns tend to remain unchanged over long periods of time. The members of these families were unable to actively adapt to the pressures coming from both inside and outside the family, because they perceived any change as threatening to the family system. The children of such families cannot become self-differentiated because they are caught up in a situation where there is rigidity in relationships and patterns of transaction, and only little information is exchanged among members.

Although the behavioral repertoire of such schizophrenogenic families is very limited, they are highly organized within themselves. Jackson (1960) described these families as often being governed by only one rule: no other rules are to be followed. This limitation demands great organization in order for family members to follow this one rule. However, because this organization does not lead the members to alternative ways of acting and to an increasing number of transactions among themselves, in other words because it does not lead the family system to an increasingly organized complexity, as the functional organization does, it can be seen as a form of disorganization. The dramatic observation that the family reacts to the improvement of the «sick member» with the development of symptoms in another member, or with the relapse of the person's symptoms upon his return home, can be seen as homeostatic mechanism that brings this disturbed family back to its balance, or as an attempt to introduce greater randomness in a rigid system.

In a healthy family, the transactions of its members are based on explicit rules that are called into question

and changed if necessary. On the contrary, disturbed families base their transactions on a few rigid and to a great extent covert rules (Jackson, and Satir, 1961). Double-bind, that is contradictory, messages, are often found in these families. The double-bind transaction is characterized by an individual involved in an intense, personal relationship in which the other person communicates to him contradictory messages, but they avoid the recognition and acknowledgement of such an incongruence (Bateson, et al., 1976).

Jackson and Weakland (1971) found that the existence of this multiplicity of contradictory messages enables the family members to avoid both agreement and disagreement. Thus, they can disqualify each other, as they:

...effectively negate what someone else has said, only in an indirect way, so that statements are not really met (p. 29).

In his studies of schizophrenic families, Lidz (cited in Jackson and Weakland, 1971) called «skewed» the families conveying an overt harmony but with cover pertinent disagreement, and «schism» families those that remain together despite the constant overt scrapping. Both types of families maintain their stability by establishing relationships that contain double-bind messages, but at the same time, by refusing to recognize and acknowledge the inconsistency of these double messages.

The children who grow up in such a disturbed context can maintain only a low level of self-differentiation because they are not allowed to openly agree or disagree with others. Thus, they do not have a sufficient appreciation of how, as well as how much, they are similar or different from their parents and others. Their parents do not encourage them to be different from themselves, they do not reinforce the children to acquire similarity with them, and they do not permit any negotiation for their similarities and differences.

Virginia Satir (1971) believes that family rules are shaped by interactional experience and these rules concern:

...(1) self and manifestation of self, or «how I may report», (2) self and expectation of other, or «what I may expect from you», and (3) self and the use of the world outside of the family, or «how I may go outside the family» (p. 129).

Family members usually are not aware of these rules or how these rules influence them. If the family exists as an open system, it can change its rules directly and appropriately in order to meet its needs. However, if it is a closed one, it refuses to change its rules, and thus the family denies or distorts reality. In a family that operates in a closed system, the child can not differentiate himself because he experiences the discrepancy between the presence of change and its acknowledged

ment, but he is not permitted by the other members to comment openly on it. The child usually finds a distorted way of commenting about the discrepancies he experiences by developing symptoms.

In closed systems families, members are doubtful about their self-worth and they tend to depend on others for support. On the contrary, in open system families, members develop a reliable and confident self-worth and they tend to draw more from themselves than others (Satir, 1972). Usually the parents of disturbed children, that is children who interact with other people in destructive ways both to themselves and to others, have low self-esteem, high hopes, and little trust. Even though these parents can acknowledge differentness, they cannot acknowledge separateness, because their low self-esteem creates a mutual need for each other. In order to enhance their low esteem, they try to make their children an extension of themselves (Satir, 1967). These children are not allowed to use external resources, but they are reinforced to increase their sameness with their parents. As a result, the children develop a poor self-esteem, they are anxious and uncertain about themselves, and they cannot assert themselves effectively. Without the right to express their opposition, children cannot declare their individuality; thus, they either become dependent and withdraw or they become aggressive and act out.

Haley (1976) believes that in order for a child to learn to differentiate himself, his peers, and his superiors, each family has to deal with organizing the hierarchy of its members and work out the rules that will define the status and position of its members. Children usually develop symptoms when they become confused with the disorganization of the family hierarchy, and with the violation of the basic rules of functional family organization.

Haley (1977) uses the term «perverse triangle» to refer to the triangular arrangement of a family organization that leads to psychopathology. The characteristics of this triangle are:

- (1) The people responding to each other in the triangle are not peers, but one of them is of a different generation from the other two.
- (2) In the process of their interaction together, the person of one generation forms a coalition with the person of the other generation against his peer.
- (3) The coalition between the two persons is denied (p. 37).

When the separation between the two generations, which is breached covertly, becomes a repetitive behavior pattern of the family, there is family dissolution, expressed in continual conflict, even violence, in divorce, or in symptomatic distress in the family members.

Schizophrenic children have often grown up in a family where they have to continuously play for one of their parents the role of the husband or the wife. Further, they are not given the chance to differentiate

themselves, due to the unclear roles and rules of their family. Their parents are confused as to the way they can exercise authority and benevolence and, according to Haley (1963), their «attempts to discipline them usually end in confusion, indecision and conflict» in the family (p. 109).

Salvador Minuchin (1975), the director of the Philadelphia Child Guidance Clinic, after working extensively with organized and disorganized families, described four types of transactions in a family organization that impede the child's self-differentiation. In enmeshed families, members have a poorly differentiated view of themselves and others because the boundaries of the family members are weak and easily crossed. In this family, children are confused about their role, they often have to take inappropriate parental roles toward each other, and usually they are forced by a parent to support him in his struggle with the other parent. In overprotective families, parents are so much concerned with protecting their child, especially if he is sick, that finally the child cannot develop his autonomy and competence. In families characterized by rigidity in their structure, family members deny any need for change and

...as a result of their inappropriately summon homeostatic mechanisms, these families live in a chronic state of submerged stress (p. 1033).

In families where there is a lack of conflict resolution, members often do not negotiate their differences and leave their problems unresolved. These four transactional characteristics—enmeshment, overprotectiveness, rigidity, and lack of conflict resolution—are typically found in families with psychosomatically ill and emotionally disturbed children.

Lyman Wynne and his co-workers, Murray Bowen and his group, and Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy and his associates in Philadelphia have also been interested in family transactions and their effect on the child's self-differentiation.

Wynne (1971) describes disturbed families as manifesting a «transactional thought disorder» and «collective cognitive chaos». The overall transactions can be characterized as bizarre, disjointed, and fragmented, and all family members seem to be caught up in this chaotic communication. As a result, members cannot relate emotionally, and thus there is an «erratic emotional distancing». The child in this family cannot become self-differentiated because even when he wants to relate to the other members, they block him in

...a relentless, deadening fixity of distance in relationships and a perseveratively rigid manner of organizing thoughts and perceptions. Whimsical, poignant, anxious, angry, or simply narrative accounts are all likely to be viewed in these families from the same vantage point (p. 302).

Bowen (1965) uses the term «undifferentiated family ego mass» to refer to the family «emotional oneness». In the family dynamics there is a «fused cluster of egos of individual family members with a common ego boundary» (p. 219). When two people get together in a marriage, they form a new family ego mass. If they are both well-differentiated, they can maintain both their individuality and a mature emotional closeness. However, if they are less differentiated, they become involved in a fusion of «selves». If a high level of the couple's impairment is transmitted to their child, it is most probable that he will become schizophrenic.

Bowen (1965) describes the parents of schizophrenic children as people who remained emotionally undifferentiated in the ego mass with their parents, at the time they were children and adolescents. When later they tried to get away from their parents and function independently, they had to «tear themselves away», to establish «pseudo selves» with a «pseudo separation» from the parental ego mass. In marriage, their closeness results in fusion of the two «pseudo selves» into a «common self» with obliteration of ego boundaries between them, and loss of individuality to the «common self». In order to avoid the anxiety of this fusion, they try to keep an emotional distance between them, the «emotional divorce», and they maintain a «pseudo self».

The mechanism through which the parental problem is transmitted to the child, is a long process which starts even before the child is born. The child has no «self» of his own, because he is only «being» for his parents. According to Bowen (1965):

The child functions as a stabilizer for the parents, converting the unstable father-mother ego mass into a more stable triad. Parental stability depends on the child functioning as the «triadic one» (p. 223).

Thus, any attempt of the child to become autonomous and leave the family is prevented by his parents. Parents project their problem on the child, gradually, through the «family projection process», which has three steps. In the first step, the «feeling-thinking» step, the parents start thinking about some inadequacies of defects in the child. In the next step, the «examining-labeling» step, they diagnose a defect in the child that best fits their own «feeling state». In the final step, the «treating» step, parents behave towards the child according to their own diagnosis. The child becomes more and more inadequate as he accepts his parents' projections, and

The projection process reaches a critical stage when the triadic one collapses into psychosis and can no longer function as the absorber of the family projection (p. 225).

According to Boszormenyi-Nagy (1965), healthy transactions in a family are based on the trust among

members, which is expressed in a temporal predictability of reciprocal transactions. This «basic trust» is built upon the reciprocal relationship of family members who enter into a dialogue and reach a creative synthesis and a new bounding of the family system. The child learns to differentiate between Self and Other through the give-and-take, the sharing, and the assessment of the family relationship, which is based on mutuality. That is, each person maintains his autonomy while, at the same time, he values and recognizes the other's autonomy. While in a healthy family, members can both distinguish and accept their differences, in families with autistic children members relate to each other through avoiding their differences. These latter families have an amorphous organization based on fixed antithetical (opposite) roles, and their members become dependent on each other's functions. This is called by Boszormenyi-Nagy «polarized fusion of roles». The child of such a family cannot differentiate himself because he cannot reach a synthesis of the I-We experiences through a dialogue. As a result, he becomes socially isolated or he establishes a symbiotic relationship with his parents.

Boszormenyi-Nagy (1973) also referred to the concept of «parentification» as the «subjective distortion of a relationship as if one's partner or even children were his parents» (p. 151). Temporary parentification of a child is a normal part of family life and helps the child learn to be responsible, to identify with differentiated roles for his later life, and to establish a give-and-take of trust, support, and nurturance. However, if the child is constantly obliged to play this role, he is in a bind that traps him in prolonged compliance to his parents' possessive needs and exploitation. Usually, these parents are immature people who lack self-delineation vis-a-vis their own parents. Thus, they try unconsciously to retain their parents through their child.

According to Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark (1973), for the child to become fully differentiated he has to «disengage from an exclusive loyalty to the family of origin and devote himself to peer and marital relationships» (p. 106). If the child is rigidly tied to his parents with «invisible loyalty» commitments, he experiences much conflict and guilt, and he cannot commit himself to new relationships. Frequently, people are not aware of their loyalties to their family, nor do they show overt acts of loyalty. However, these authors believe that:

...seemingly meaningless self-destructions, unfounded violent attacks on the parent, delinquency or psychosis in the offspring may all result from inalterable, fateful unconscious devotion to the parents (p. 163).

Another important theorist who dealt with the influence of family transactions on the child's self-differentiation is Ronald D. Laing. Utilizing the insights

gained from treating families of schizophrenics, neurotics, and normals at the Tavistock Clinic and Tavistock Institute of Human Relations, Laing (1965) introduced the concept of «mystification» for the study of pathological communication patterns in families. He discovered that one of the ways families handle their problems is through the use of mystification. That is, they avoid the conflicts that arise. These families try to confuse their members so that they fail to see what is «really» being experienced, or being done, or going on, and fail to distinguish or discriminate the actual issues. According to Laing (1965):

...the mystified person (or persons) is by definition confused, but may or may not feel confused... The mystified person, in so far as he has been mystified, is unable to see the authentic conflict, but may or may not experience intra- or interpersonal conflict of an inauthentic kind. He may experience false peace, false calm, or inauthentic conflict and confusion over false issues (p. 345).

In the context of the mystifying and mystified families, when the child's perceptions contradict those of his parents, the parents try to resolve this contradiction by transposing the child's experiential modality from perception to imagination («It's just your imagination»), or from the memory of perception to the memory of a dream («You must have dreamt it»). At other times, parents disconfirm the context of the child's experience and replace it by attributions of experience conjunctive with their own view of the child. Thus, according to Laing (1965), parents have the «right» to determine the child's experience, or the child is under an «obligation» to his parents «to experience, or not to experience, himself, them, the world, or any aspect of it, in a particular way» (p. 346). The parents of schizophrenic children use mystification frequently as a defense mechanism that provides them, on the one hand, with security for themselves, and on the other hand, with the chance to control the experiences and actions of their children. The mystified child differs from that in a double-bind in that the former «may be left with a relatively unequivocal 'right' way to experience and to act» (p. 353).

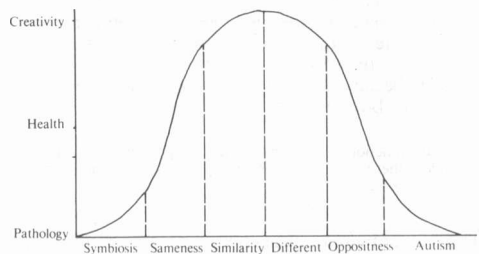
#### *The Continuum of Likeness in Self-differentiation*

In the course of this chapter, the influence of family transactions on the child's self-differentiation has been described. The child who becomes self-differentiated can assert his similarity and differentness, and he acquires an increasing autonomy in establishing meaningful relationships with others, in making decisions for himself, and in handling his feelings and conflicts. The child who lacks self-differentiation tends to be confused about himself and others, unable to discriminate his similarities and differences from others, or assert his in-

dividuality and self-determination.

L'Abate (1976) defines the process of self-differentiation along a continuum of likeness (Figure 2), which is related to various ranges and degrees of likeness: symbiosis, sameness, similarity, differentness, oppositeness and autism. Self-differentiation can occur along two routes: a positive and a negative one. The positive route of differentiation represents man's attempts: (1) to preserve his health, both mental and physical; that is, to maintain a state of adjustment and well-being by exercising his abilities, and by trying to change constructively, to progress for himself and others; (2) to achieve creativity; that is, to become able to produce original patterns of thinking in solving personal and social problems. The negative self-differentiation route leads man to pathology; that is, behavior which produces hurt, harm and eventually the destruction of man. Health and creativity in family transactions are found in similarity and differentness, while pathology is found in symbiosis, sameness or oppositeness, and autism.

FIGURE 2. *The Continuum of Likeness in Self-differentiation*  
(L'Abate, 1976)



Families that impede the child's self-differentiation, because they either establish symbiotic relationships which require the oneness of all members, or they establish autistic relationships based on the extreme separateness of members, can be found in the extreme positions of the continuum. In the intermediary positions of similarity and differentness we can find the families that foster the child's self-differentiation, because they allow children to choose the degree of their likeness or unlikeness of the other members. That is, these families allow the children to be both similar and different from the other family members.

From a dialectical point of view, L'Abate (1976) assumes that «opposites coexist», and thus, symbiosis and autism or sameness and oppositeness, can be found together in the same relationship among family members. These two opposites produce extreme contradictions, because they can «alternate and vacillate



from one extreme to another» (p. 83). However, contradictions in the middle of the continuum, that is between similarity and differentness, decrease, because there is less degree of variability between them than in the other extremes. As a result, families in the middle of the continuum can change their degree of similarity and differentness more easily, and without much stress and conflict in the members, than families in the extremes of the continuum.

#### IV. summary and conclusions

##### *The Child's Self-differentiation in an Organized and in a Disorganized Family*

The family as an open, anotropic, information-processing, living system is organized in such a way as to maintain openness in organization and organization in openness. The child cannot be separated from this context, but must be seen as an integral part of it. When the family is an efficient working group, the child becomes self-differentiated as he increasingly establishes interrelatedness, interdependence, and transactions with the other family members. If, however, the family is an entropic group, that is a disorganized group that remains static without actualizing the potential of its members, the child cannot enter into this interrelationship, interdependence, and transaction, his differentiation is blocked, he starts living in unreality, and he develops an inadequate self-structure.

In a family with clear and flexible boundaries, rules, and roles, as well as clear and consistent communication patterns, transactions among members allow freedom of action, a wide range of choice among alternatives, and a tolerance for conflict and ambiguity. In this type of family, members trust each other and they establish reciprocal relationships that meet the changing needs of both the individual and the family. The child, involved in the reciprocal, on-going process of family life, learns gradually to distinguish and accept his similarities and differences from others, to set clear boundaries on his own feelings, role allocations, responsibilities, and functions. The parents of this child are usually differentiated individuals who have established a relationship in which all family members can grow, mature, and express themselves.

A typical disordered family has a rigid organization that inhibits its members from meeting their needs, from facing their conflicts openly and directly, and from finding effective and creative ways of solving their problems. The child in such a family is forced to identify with the other members either by sameness or oppositeness, and he is not allowed to define himself as an autonomous and separate individual. He either has to constantly agree and conform to his family's double-binds, or he has to constantly disagree and deny the

family patterns. However, both conforming and opposing the system can be seen as a homeostatic mechanism that keeps the family going without changing or differentiating itself. Parents in such families are often undifferentiated individuals, unable to live functionally in the present. They are still dominated by their past and by stereotyped modes of problem-solving. In their relationships with their children, such parents are authoritarian or permissive in improper ways that confuse the children and put them in a double-bind situation. These parents also tend to establish symbiotic and autistic relationships with their children.

##### *Implications for Further Research: «Educating» Families*

It becomes obvious from the findings of the family therapists that, by studying the child's self-differentiation in his family, one can gather a wealth of information about the family organization, transactions among members, and the ways family members deal with their problems. This information is not only valuable for understanding the healthy development of a family, but also for treating a family with less differentiated members, and for deciding the planning and structure of the family therapy.

Much research remains to be done before we can establish the criteria or conditions that inhibit or enhance the child's self-differentiation in his family. Studies including more undifferentiated family members, such as autistic children, are needed to isolate the characteristic patterns of transaction among the members. Longitudinal studies with families under family therapy would also offer much.

Much remains to be done in the area of prevention. If we wish to enhance the mental health of the community, we should try to make «education» an ally of psychological health and to start training families in the effective ways they can promote their growth and development. We can help family members become more aware of their transactions within the family and of their relations with the larger community, as well as more sensitive to the ways these relations and transactions affect each member of their family. Education of family members offers them new opportunities for learning to express and to share in a direct and clear way what is actually going within and among them. They are also given the opportunity to gain a new perspective of themselves and others, to see how they influence each other, and to find new ways of communicating and solving their problems. The current knowledge of family organization and of the patterns of transaction which lead to mental health should be used in programs for prevention and for family training and education in order to promote family life.

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