

Attila András Szücs  
University of Pécs, Hungary,  
Department of Philosophy  
Amaryl Árkovits  
University of Pécs, Hungary,  
Clinical Center, Department of Psychiatry and Psychotherapy  
Krisztina Dorn  
University of Pécs, Hungary,  
Clinical Center, Pediatric Clinic, Department of Child Psychiatry

# Differentiation, adolescent autonomy from the perspective of family therapy

Dyferencjacja, autonomia dorastających  
z perspektywy terapii rodzinnej

*Rex erit qui recte faciet, Qui non faciet, non erit.*  
Horatius

## Abstract

*The paper starts from the premise that late and not always complete differentiation from the family of origin is a significant problem in our society. We intend to discuss this issue by referring to individual developmental and family therapy models. The paper provides an overview of how different schools of family therapy, especially the transgenerational school, treat the question of individual differentiation. The other model to be described is Erik Erikson's model of the individual psychosocial development. In summary, we aim to provide insights into comprehending the questions and difficulties of differentiation, and suggest possible ways of how the parent - child relations can develop for the child to reach confident adulthood from the inherent immaturity of adolescence.*

**Keywords:** *family therapy, adolescents, differentiation, parents.*

## Abstrakt

Artykuł wychodzi z założenia, że późna i nie zawsze całkowita dyferencjacja z rodziny pochodzenia jest istotnym problemem w naszym społeczeństwie. Zamierzamy omówić tę kwestię, odnosząc się do modelu terapii indywidualnego rozwoju oraz modelu terapii rodzinnej. Praca ta przedstawia przegląd, jak różne szkoły terapii rodzinnej, szczególnie szkoła międzypokoleniowa, traktują kwestię indywidualnej dyferencjacji. Drugim modelem tu przedstawionym jest model Erika Eriksona, model indywidualnego psychospołecznego rozwoju. Podsumowując, staramy się zapewnić dogłębne zrozumienie problemów i trudności dyferencjacji oraz zasugerować możliwe sposoby, by relacje rodzice – dzieci mogły rozwijać się tak, by dziecko osiągnęło bezpieczną dorosłość z przyrodzonej niedojrzałości dorastania.

**Słowa kluczowe:** terapia rodzinna, dorastająca młodzież, dyferencjacja, rodzice.

This paper intends to discuss the phenomenon that the time of gaining an adult status for adolescents is increasingly postponed in our society. This issue stemming from the social context has become a recent important topic of family therapy as well. In this perspective there are a number of challenges and tasks to be completed, ranging from late commitment in partnerships to the characteristics of the European retirement systems, and to demographic questions. Elaborating on these topics is beyond the scope of this study, so it will focus on postponed teenage differentiation in the perspective of family therapy.

Our topic is framed by processes ranging from the onset of adolescence to complete differentiation from parents. Naturally these two – individual and relational – processes are closely related, the first period determining the other, and their development requires years.

The timeframe for reaching emotional independence has extended in our European culture. Due to this extension, the former tight dynamics of departing from parents cannot be maintained. Now this period owns certain plasticity, in which it is hard for the young generation to find family or community reference points (patterns, systems, cultural practices or rituals), thus, this transitional period might turn out fearful, full of anxiety.

## Individual- and family therapy aspects of differentiation

The issue of differentiation is easier to understand and may provide a broader perspective, if we consider the family therapy aspects first.

Each family has its own principal values as culture, nationality, religion or political orientation, etc. (Goldenberg 2008, 38). However, a constant change is also present in families, which enables the unit to meet new environmental challenges and mobilize its adaptive capacity through generations. In the case of well-functioning families having flexible boundaries, these two processes are adequately balanced.

The everyday life of families is entwined with vertical, transgenerational influences, which sometimes exert their impact unattended, other times in the form of explicit rules, frames and borders. They seem to determine present as decades- and centuries-old messages of the past. In a positive sense, these transgenerational messages, or family myths often serve as safety signals, but they can appear as obstacles of family development, if they fail to follow the requirements and challenges of a new era. Family development (or its stagnation) may mostly be observed in the time of life cycle changes. These life cycle changes serve as turning points of the continuous development, they offer new dynamics, however, they often reorganize patterns and relations, and can even challenge values. If the family is flexible enough, these reorganizations may bring about new opportunities, especially if the transgenerational patterns inherited from the families of origin allow for this. In the opposite cases, blocks of development may provoke individual and family crisis situations.

The transition from adolescence to young adulthood is an especially sensitive period in terms of individual- and family development. In this period, the young individual has to meet severe burdens of solving the tasks of the Eriksonian developmental crisis (identity vs. role-diffusion, see detailed below). Here the transformation of the family structure is inevitable for the adolescent to be able to reach autonomy. Differentiation of the former child is often a hard-won position for both the old and the young generation. There are trifling questions to be discussed as personal liberties of owning a smartphone or a moped and the consent to staying out, to the more comprehensive issues of choosing schools or professions, and so on. The negotiation of these questions can turn out to be battlefields at the time of the life cycle change. Similarly to individuals, as Carter and McGoldrick (Goldenberg 2008, 40) conceptualized it, families also experience life cycles. These following are the six stages:

1. Leaving home, single young adults;
2. Joining families through marriage: The new couple;
3. Families with young children;
4. Families with adolescents;
5. Launching children and moving on;
6. Families in later life.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to detail the features of each cycle, however, these definitions show that struggles for autonomy may appear in several life cycles. We intend to consider cycle 4. and 5. in this study.

We build our discussion of the adolescence autonomy on the concepts of transgenerational family therapy.

Based on the views of the movement's most significant theorists, Murray Bowen, and Iván Böszörményi-Nagy we interpret differentiation from the family as a multigenerational process.

Bowen considers families as a system of relations arching through generations (Goldenberg and Goldenberg, 2008, 41). His concept of the family system grounds the perspective that compares the family system to other natural/organic systems that contain the possibility and ability for change. Thus, here we need to view differentiation in its natural manifestation as a process in the relational emotional network. Bowen conceptualized eight distinct relations of the families' system of resources. In his family concept, it is anxiety that grounds organic functioning to such an extent that it is handed down in generations in the family system. This phenomenon is relevantly present in both the individual and the family's emotional system of relations. When attempts of individualization both in adolescence and in young adulthood trigger tension, they stimulate the appearance of anxiety induced in the state of shaken family balance.

The eight core concepts of the family systems theory:

1. Differentiation of Self (the most important concept);
2. Nuclear Family Emotional System;
3. Triangles;
4. Family Projection Process;
5. Multigenerational Transmission Process;
6. Emotional Cutoff;
7. Sibling Position;
8. Societal Emotional Process.

In the following we discuss the ones that bear relevance in young adults' differentiation. Separation serves as a resource in adolescent differentiation. In order to be able to differentiate from the family the young adults need to mark their own self-boundaries. If the individualization in adolescence fails, differentiation from the family may also be hindered or failed. The level of differentiation may manifest in crisis or boundary situations.

Differentiation of the self is difficult in such situations as the death of a family member, illness, marriage, or childbearing, because they are often tension/anxiety loaded. In these situations it is quite difficult to experience the separation of feelings and the intellect.

Bowen defines as ego-mass the state that lacks differentiation within a family, which means the enmeshment of the boundaries between members. While in a family that is able to develop, there is a changing dynamic of differentiation and enmeshment, in families without inner boundaries the members' individual inclinations and the formation of their individual identity is made difficult.

Murray Bowen created a scale of differentiation to illustrate how the consolidated self – as the trademark of differentiation – can form a mature personality.

The dynamics of the *feeling* process vs. the *intellectual* processes is detailed in the following scale of categories.

1. Persons living in fused family relations, trapped in the dominance of their feelings, their differentiation is not complete.
2. In the second category the level of differentiation is low. The person is little further of the closed emotional bonds of the family. But the emotion-controlled activity is still dominant, which is meant to dissolve in trying to please others.
3. On the third level of differentiation the person can keep distance from the (family) fusion. At this stage individuals may have independent worldviews, however others' opinion is highly decisive and their decisions need to be acknowledged by others.
4. At the fourth stage the mature personality is highly individualized and the dynamics of feelings vs. intellectual processes is differentiated from the family system of relations. The level of autonomy, conflict- and stress-tolerance is high. The person is differentiated both in emotional and intellectual processes.

The second frame of understanding in which the adolescent drive for autonomy may be discussed is Erik H. Erikson's psychosocial developmental model, which can be made parallel with family development. The Eriksonian model describes individual development, whereas the family life cycle model answers family system-level questions.

Following the Freudian developmental model, Erikson's concept intends to connect people's psychological and sociocultural development (Erikson 2002, 243). His theory reveals an eight-stage developmental model, and this model has become one of the least disputed concepts of modern psychology. According to Erikson, humans are creative, self-developing beings. It is identity that we constantly search for. Identity is 'self-power' that is able to renew and change. Development is always dynamic but not without conflicts, and it can only be interpreted in social constellations. Human development is fueled by

the mutual impact of intrapsychic personality development and the social environment.

This is why developmental crises occur in the collision of normative social institutions (norms, patterns, culture or politics) and the personality (Erikson 2002, 245). Developmental (psychosocial) crises are inevitable for personal development. These critical periods (months or even years) may be predicted and estimated, but there can be individual variances. To connect the above to the aim of this paper, it is important to note that the turning points of both the Eriksonian psychosocial development (especially adolescence and young adulthood) and the family life cycle model have been considerably postponed recently in our culture.

Erikson's stages of the psychosocial development are the following:

1. Trust vs. Distrust (year 0–1.5);
2. Autonomy vs. Shame (year 1.5–3);
3. Initiative vs. Guilt (year 3–5);
4. Industry vs. Inferiority (year 5–12);
5. Identity vs. Role confusion (year 12–18);
6. Intimacy vs. Isolation (year 18–40);
7. Generativity vs. Stagnation (year 40–65);
8. Integrity vs. Despair (year 65+).

The transition between each stage is considered as a crisis in the Eriksonian model. The crisis involves the possibility of change or renewal for the personality. This issue raises the question that is significant in our discussion, whether at the threshold of adolescence and young adulthood individuals are able to tackle differentiation on their own. This also involves the crisis of the family, as this differentiation takes place within the frame of the family functioning. However, if the adolescent is able to overcome the crisis of change he/she can qualify for a new quality in adult life. As referred to above this process of individuation cannot be realized without conflicts and confrontation both on individual- and family system level (Winnicott 2004, 141).

It seems that confrontation cannot be avoided, it is only its outcome that can be different. In Winnicott's understanding young people emerge 'shy' and 'capricious' from the world of childhood, during adolescent development. They depart from dependence and stagger towards the adult status. Winnicott finds the social environment highly significant for the adolescent to strive in, as it is the environment that can determine the possibility for change into an adult. Even if the parents had 'good enough' functioning, and the differentiations and separations of the earlier stages of the child's life were smooth, there is no guarantee that the adolescent differentiation is completed without rough times (Winnicott 2004, 143).

In children's unconscious functioning, becoming an adult is an inevitable desire and event, appearing in the form of an aggressive action. Growing up is an unavoidable process interpreted as a frightening situation. Adulthood is a parental privilege, where children may seem as dangerous invaders, aiming to conquer parents' unshared power.

During their development, children are provided with freedom, but that is always framed by the parents. No matter how tight or liberal this designated freedom is, it can entitle youngsters to challenge its borders. Paradoxically, it is freedom provided by the parents that gives way to rebellion.

Revolt as the principal act of adolescence targets adulthood, however this tight 'battlefield' is an important means for 'revolutionaries' to carry out the process of differentiation. Caregivers (parents) have important roles to support this process and to prevent two cases.

One case is, when children lose their chance to fight for their freedom, because they had become 'parentified' earlier. This is when parents invest their offspring with the adult role too early. Parents are deprived of their imaginary throne, and hand down endowments to the children that they find hard to use sensibly. Besides endowment, the other typical feature of parentification is that the parents seem to abandon their children on their way towards adulthood. Following the natural inclinations, youngsters attempt to win the adult status. They challenge borders, question parental privileges, claim autonomy in this 'freedom fight', which is inherent in a natural process independent from eras or cultures. However, should the borders become too mobile, parental resistance has to be built in the process.

It is important that adolescents may fight several battles against parents, but they should never win the war, not even when they aim to conquer the throne. The process of teenage differentiation is a virtual game, in which children finally acquire freedom and autonomy, if they are not allowed to win the war, only a few battles. If it is carried out like this, both parties seem to win at the end of the process.

Both the children and the parents keep on playing the imaginary game, even the child has 'over-won' the game, and has been endowed with adult liberties as well as responsibilities.

It is not rare that as a negative consequence, the too early crowned king with his premature autonomy turns against other family members. Immaturity is the essence of adolescence, in which parents need to manifest their responsibility. Thus, immaturity is not a negative feature attesting children's deficiencies and inability to grow up. On the contrary, it means the opportunity for development, for compensating for lacks, and here time is on the parents' side. This process

can be experienced as a hard but thrilling route, where both children and parents may enrich their lives with creativity, new ideas and thoughts all through to the onset of adulthood.

The above sentences may sound pathetic or idealistic, but it is certainly true that the adolescence differentiation process cannot be carried out or even viewed without the virtue of patience. If we lack patience or misuse time, both parties may suffer from the premature autonomy, and children's development may halt and they turn into 'pseudo-adults'.

If parents are able and willing to retain control, the adolescent process cannot go astray, and children may develop their autonomy and adult identity in due course. For this to happen, both parents and offspring need to be provided with the necessary playground.

Teenagers are not aware of their own immaturity, and they are not even expected to be aware. Thus, immaturity may serve children *en route*. Not even parents are completely and consciously aware of the extent of their children's immaturity. But it is more important that the parents should be present to help children in their immaturity. This being present, involves resistance and setting boundaries, which may be challenged without painful consequences. The experiments for adulthood should be encouraged, but parents need to provide protective guidance in the form of authority and resistance, should the boundaries be weakened. Although authority and resistance bear opposition and confrontation, these fights must be fought, no matter how hard warfare is. In the long run, these struggles turn out to be useful and creative. Children may experience the safety of supportive parental guidance, and cannot feel abandoned, this way they will be able to hammer out adult identity.

It is also important to see what happens if authoritative resistance fails. As detailed above, this may result in parentification. In another case, by skipping the necessary confrontation, the young person will gain 'fake' maturity, which will deprive him/her of the opportunity of freedom, new creative ideas and experimenting. This 'fake' adult identity will not raise the young person in the adult world, but will close the opportunities for gaining a real differentiated self that can confidently function in an autonomous way.

If confrontations are present in the teenager–parent relationship, they are always dynamic and represent great power. They contain powerful aggression. In Winnicott's view, this is because the physical, biological development of the youngsters is simultaneous with their psychological maturing (Winnicott 2004, 144). This is dangerous, as it may also give way to aggressive actions.



However, after the aggressive acts, young people always feel guilty, thus, they need years of experimenting with power to find the right balance of these situations not to demolish parents or immerse in guilt.

Consequently, it is the task of the parents to meet all the challenges their children set in front of them. These challenges deserve the replies of parental presence, they must be taken seriously, even if the reply is not always nice.

Adults can help their adolescent children most, if they are present practicing the values of practicality, tolerance, and the acceptance of immaturity. If they intend to find new balances by undertaking conflicts. This is the best framework for teenagers to assist their maturing and differentiating process, so that they could reach happy, contented and confident adult state.

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