

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SELF-DIFFERENTIATION IN FAMILY-OF-ORIGIN AND SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING AMONG ROMANIAN ADOLESCENTS: A CORRELATIONAL STUDY

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Abstract

Differentiation of self through experiences in the family-of-origin is a consistent predictor of adolescents' psychological and social adjustment to developmental tasks. The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between the level of self-differentiation through the relational and emotional experiences that adolescents live in their families and the indicators of subjective well-being. Participants were 160 Romanian adolescents living in intact families. The data were collected using a standardized protocol that included the Romanian versions of four scales and inventories: Differentiation in the Family System Scale (Anderson and Sabatelli, 1992), Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener et al., 1985), Multidimensional Students' Life Satisfaction Scale (Huebner, 1994, 2001) and Beck Depression Inventory - Fast Screen (Beck, Steer and Brown, 2000). Several predictive models were tested using multiple linear regression analysis. Multivariate analyses data provided empirical support for all working hypotheses. Theoretical and practical implications for school counsellors and psychotherapists who work with adolescents are discussed.

Key words: Adolescents, self-differentiation, family-of-origin, subjective well-being, correlational study

1. Introduction

As a period of transition between childhood and adulthood, adolescence is a challenge in human individual development. It is a stage marked by major transformations, but also by the risk to wander off the normal development path. In contemporary society, adolescence has become a

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critical period because adolescents must cope with a double pressure: the need to adapt to the day-to-day developmental tasks, plus the multiple challenges of functioning and individual development in the context of the post-industrial society (Crockett and Silbereisen, 2000).

One's family-of-origin represents the space in which a human individual discovers the first opportunities for personal growth. Couple and family therapists argue that the early experiences that a person lives in the family-of-origin are an essential legacy that often marks his/her entire life course (Muraru, 2013, Nichols, 2003, Nichols and Schwartz, 2004). The social and emotional climate promoted in the family-of-origin has a substantial impact on how an individual manages the changes that are inevitable at various functional and developmental levels, including self-identity. Developmental psychology specialists and family therapists have highlighted the need to promote a greater personal autonomy for adolescents, so that they develop positively (Bell and Bell, 2005, Chang et al., 2003, Manzi et al., 2006). Adolescents living in cohesive families where expression of emotions is an authentic culture and where the boundaries between members are flexible have a lower risk of experiencing side-slips from the normal course of development, especially in terms of configuring self-identity, mental health and their subjective well-being. In this systemic view, self-differentiation of each family member in the context of transactions that characterize the dynamics of intra-family relationships is both a direction of individual efforts oriented towards positive development and personal growth as well as a relevant objective for the therapists assisting families (Manzi et al., 2006; Silverberg, Tennenbaum and Jacob, 1992).

In Romania, researchers' concern with the issue of adolescent self-differentiation and the impact this process has on the developmental path and quality is quite low. The studies focus on the effects of self-differentiation, in the context of early experiences lived by individuals in the family-of-origin, on areas such as attachment to marital partners or marital adaptation (Muraru, 2013; Muraru and Turliuc, 2013, 2012). We have not identified studies on the relationship between adolescent self-differentiation in their families and well-being. The present study responds to this practical need.

2. Theoretical background

One of the outstanding representatives of systemic family therapy is American psychiatrist M. Bowen. He was among the pioneers of family therapy and among the founders of the systemic approach. Since the 1950s, Bowen has developed the theory of family systems to explain how family-based transactions occur and how a family system works (Nichols and Schwartz, 2004).

Bowen has operated with a number of innovative concepts, such as: the multigenerational family system, the dynamics of the family system, the emotional fusion between family members vs. self-differentiation, emotional triangle (as a unit of analysis of relationships within a family system), the history of early family relationships, the balance between being with other family members and individuality (independence).

The family-of-origin plays a key role in transmitting and maintaining relational patterns at different stages of the family life cycle (Sabatelli and Bartle-Haring, 2003). In the broadest sense, the family-of-origin refers to the natural family of a person in which that person was born or adopted (Nichols, 2003). In Romanian culture, the common sense attributed to the family-of-origin refers to the family in which a person is born and grows. The primary function of the family-of-origin is to achieve early socialization and ensure the safety of the offspring. In postmodern culture, the meanings of the family-of-origin have begun to change, making it increasingly difficult to delimit the concept. In the study we conducted on adolescent population, the concept of the family-of-origin was considered to have the first meaning to which we referred, namely that of the intact family in which a person was born (or was adopted) and grew up with a mother and a father and possibly one or more brothers and / or sisters.

According to Bowen's conceptual and interventional system, the family-of-origin has a major influence on the structure of an individual's personality, being considered a determinant of unresolved emotional problems and life-long vulnerabilities (Bowen, 1978). One of the key concepts on which the systemic approach to family functioning relies is self-differentiation. Self-differentiation involves an individual's ability to separate one's cognitive-intellectual and emotional functioning from that of other significant individuals with whom they live (for example, other family members) or with whom they interact at one point in their existence (Bowen, 1978). Self-differentiation is governed by two dimensions: intrapsychic differentiation - separation of emotions and feelings from thoughts and ideas, and interpersonal differentiation - the courage of a person to assert one's identity in front of the other members of the family system to which he/she belongs and to think, feel and act autonomously. In short, self-differentiation means the ability of a family member to function autonomously through his / her own choice, while remaining emotionally connected with the relational family system.

People with a poorly differentiated self are more prone to fuse with other family members and leave themselves impregnated by the emotions and expectations that prevail in their family life (Bowen, 1978; Brown, 1999). Such persons have great difficulty in separating their own thoughts, emotions, feelings and actions from those of other family members or those manifested

by life partners. They depend excessively on the approval and acceptance of others, permanently manifesting the fear of being rejected (Nichols and Schwartz, 2004). Instead, people with a well-differentiated self can transcend their own emotions as well as those that dominate their family system. They tend to be more cognitively-intellectually and emotionally flexible and more adaptable to unpredictable changes or longer periods of stress. Well-differentiated and well-established individuals live their own emotions and can maintain a certain degree of objectivity and emotional distance to their own emotional problems and to the negative emotions that others express. Bowen (1978) argued that well-differentiated people tend to have a more solid, consistent, and better integrated self. Bowen's arguments are supported by the findings of numerous studies conducted on samples of subjects recruited from various cultural contexts. According to these studies, adolescents, young people and adults with a well-differentiated self are more able to adapt to the changes inherent in everyday life, to identify and capitalize on opportunities for personal growth and to maintain physical and mental health, as well as a state of well-being (Bell and Bell, 2005; Chang et al., 2003; Chung and Gale, 2006; Knauth, Skowron and Escobar, 2006; Manzi et al., 2006; Muraru and Turliuc, 2013; Sabatelli and Bartle-Haring, 2003; Skowron, Stanley and Shapiro, 2009).

3. The current study

Self-differentiation through the experiences that the adolescent lives in the family represents a consistent predictor of psychological and social adaptation to the tasks specific to adolescent age. According to Bowen (1978), threats to self-identity (and thus, to personal well-being) can occur especially when an individual is confronted with important transition periods, which intensify concerns about possible changes and reconfigurations of identity. Or, it is known that adolescence is one of the most important transition periods in an individual's life (Papalia and Wendkos-Olds, 1992).

In the context of transition from middle school to high school and then from high school to university studies, the social and emotional environment promoted inside the family has a substantial impact on how a young person manages changes in self-identity. In adolescence, the exploration of self-identity is also directed towards the gradual and mutual redefinition of boundaries that define relationships between adolescent and parents (Steinberg, Elmen and Mounts, 1989). Family relations are entering a new stage of reorganization. For the adolescent to develop positively, it is necessary to promote greater personal autonomy, without reducing the family support that the adolescent needs to cope with the changes he/she undergoes (Aseltine and

Gore, 1993). Processes that mark the family system can deeply impact the adolescents' ability to cope with the changes in their self-identity and gradually strengthen their identity (Goossens, 1995). In this line of thought, the findings of studies suggest that adolescents living in cohesive and flexible families with regard to the boundaries between members and the pairs they form have a lower risk of wandering off the normal development path, especially in terms of configuring self-identity and subjective well-being (Chung and Gale, 2006; Knauth, Skowron and Escobar, 2006; Manzi et al., 2006).

3.1. Aim and research questions

The study we conducted aimed to investigate the relationship between the level of self-differentiation in the relational and emotional experiences that adolescents live in their families and the indicators of subjective well-being. The main question of the investigation was: *What is the magnitude of the unique contribution (beyond that of the demographic variables) that self-differentiation through emotional and relational experiences in the family-of-origin has in accounting for individual differences in terms of satisfaction with different aspects of day-to-day functioning as well as emotional well-being among adolescents?*

3.2. Hypotheses

The working hypotheses were:

- H1. The high level of self-differentiation from parents through relational and affective family experiences is a positive predictor of adolescents' satisfaction with family life.
- H2. The high level of adolescent self-differentiation from parents is a positive predictor of adolescents' satisfaction with friends.
- H3. The high level of adolescent self-differentiation from parents is a positive predictor for adolescents' satisfaction with school life.
- H4. The high level of adolescent self-differentiation from parents is a positive predictor of adolescents' satisfaction with their own person.
- H5. The high level of adolescent self-differentiation from parents is a positive predictor of adolescents' satisfaction with their own life in all its aspects.
- H6. The high level of adolescent self-differentiation from parents is a negative predictor of the intensity of depression symptoms.

3.3. Variables and design

The study was based on a quantitative, correlative design. The working hypotheses were tested using linear hierarchical regression analysis. The *independent variables* were: a) *socio-demographic variables* (control) – gender, age, family situation (people with whom adolescents lived at home); b) *core variables* – the level of self-differentiation in relation to parents (composite scores for the subject-mother, respectively subject-father). The *dependent variables* were indicators of the subjective well-being: a) the level of satisfaction with life (family life satisfaction, satisfaction with relationships with friends, satisfaction with school activity, self-satisfaction and overall satisfaction with life); b) the intensity of depression symptoms.

4. Method

4.1. Participants

The data results from processing the answers provided by 160 adolescents living in intact families (along with both parents and, in many cases, brothers and/or sisters and/or other persons) to the standardized questionnaire protocol. These were selected from an initial number of 243 high school students in Iași city (95 boys and 148 girls aged between 14 and 19). Students were recruited through an intentional sampling plan. Questionnaire protocols were administered to students in two classes for each school level. After the questionnaire was administered, there were selected the students whose completed response protocols were eligible to be retained in the final database. Of the total number of adolescents whose answers to the questionnaires were eligible to be retained in the final database, 66 were boys and 94 girls. Adolescents' ages ranged from 14 to 19 years ($M = 16.81$ years, $SD = 1.40$ years).

4.2. Measures

Adolescents who participated in the study completed a standardized protocol that included five questionnaires (a total of 94 items). To measure self-differentiation through the affective and relational experiences that adolescents lived in their families-of-origin, the Romanian version (Muraru, 2013) for the instrument *The Differentiation in the Family System Scale* (DIFS, Anderson and Sabatelli, 1992) was administered. In the original version, the instrument includes 66 closed-ended items (scaled by five verbal anchors, from 1 – *never* to 5 – *always*). The items were formulated so as to operationalize three dimensions of self-differentiation among members of a nuclear family: self-differentiation of the respondent in relation to the mother (22 items), self-differentiation of the respondent in relation to the father (22 items), respectively self-

differentiation in the relationship between mother and father (22 items). In the present study, only 44 of the 66 items of the DIFS instrument were used. The self-differentiation in the relationships between mothers and fathers of adolescents who participated in the study was not considered because it was assumed that an adolescent is not yet sufficiently capable of radiographing the quality of the relationship between parents. The score for each relational pair was obtained by adding scores to the component items (range of possible variation: 11-55). For each relational pair, a high score was considered to indicate a high level of self-differentiation, i.e. tolerance in relation to the individuality of each family member, and the context of relationships based on intimacy and emotional support. Following the instructions of Anderson and Sabatelli (1992), we calculated two composite scores by multiplying the scores in the pair subject-mother and mother-subject, respectively subject-father and father-subject. Their values could be between 121 and 3025. In the present study, the internal consistency values (Cronbach's α) were: 0.81 for the adolescent-mother pair (11 items), 0.75 for the mother-adolescent pair (11 items), 0.88 for the composite score (22 items), 0.82 for adolescent-father pair (11 items), 0.78 for the father-adolescent pair (11 items) and 0.89 for the composite score corresponding to the adolescent-father pair (22 items).

To operationalize the overall satisfaction with life, adolescents who participated in the study completed the Romanian version (Cazan, 2014) for the well-known instrument *Satisfaction with Life Scale* (SWLS, Diener et al., 1985). The scale includes five items that address the cognitive (evaluative) dimension of the subjective well-being. Adolescents responded to items on a scale of seven verbal anchors, namely from 1 – *strong disagreement* to 7 – *strong agreement*. The total score was calculated by adding scores to items (range of possible variation: 5-35). A high score was considered to indicate a high level of satisfaction an adolescent has with his own globally assessed life. For the current sample, $\alpha = 0.77$.

To operationalize the adolescents' satisfaction with various areas of life there was applied the Romanian version of *The Multidimensional Students' Life Satisfaction Scale* (MSLSS, Huebner, 2001, 1994). In the original version, the instrument includes 40 items that measure the satisfaction children and adolescents (aged 8-18) have in relation to five areas of life, namely: family life, quality of relationships with friends, activity and school life, the living environment / their living conditions and their own person. The format for item responses includes six variants, namely from 1 – *strong disagreement* to 6 – *strong agreement*. As the areas of life satisfaction are operationalized by a different number of items, the score for each domain is obtained by calculating the average score for the corresponding item (Huebner, 2001). For each of the five

areas, the score may range from 1 to 6. High scores are indicators of the high levels of satisfaction a child or adolescent has towards an area of his/her life. In the present study, adolescents completed only 31 of the 40 items of the original scale. Items that operationalize the satisfaction with the living environment were excluded, as this area was considered less relevant for the purpose of our study. The internal consistencies were: satisfaction with the family (7 items) – 0.87, satisfaction with friends (9 items) – 0.85, satisfaction with school (8 items) – 0.84, self-satisfaction (7 items) 0.69.

The intensity of depression symptoms was measured with the Romanian version (Driga et al., 2007) for the *Beck Depression Inventory-Fast Screen* instrument (BDI-FS, Beck, Steer and Brown, 2000). BDI-FS has been developed to evaluate depression in medical patients who are suffering from somatic-vegetative symptoms or in patients with substance abuse problems. It includes seven items that estimate the severity of the cognitive and affective symptoms of depression, namely: sadness, pessimism, personal failure, loss of pleasure for common things and activities, self-discrediting, feeling of guilt and suicidal ideation. The items are in the form of groups of four statements that are graded according to the severity of the symptoms (from 0 – *absence of symptoms* to 3 – *significant presence of symptoms*). The total score indicates the intensity of the symptoms of depression and is obtained by summing the scores to the items (range of possible variation: 0-21). A high score signifies high intensity of depressive cognitive and affective symptoms. For the present study, the value of internal consistency was satisfactory ($\alpha = 0.73$).

4.3. Procedure

Adolescents completed the questionnaires applied in the groups corresponding to their school classes. Answers to the questionnaires were anonymous to encourage honesty. The questionnaires were administered between February and March 2018. Students in each class were told that if they wanted, they could participate in a study that looked at family factors that contributed to mental health and well-being of adolescents, without specifying the variables pursued. There were no refusals to respond to the questionnaires. For each class of students, administration of the questionnaire protocol required, on average, an hour. The answers to the standardized questionnaires were evaluated according to the instructions given by the authors in the scientific articles that were the conceptual and psychometrical basis for the instruments we used to operationalize the constructs of interest.

4.4. Statistical analyses

Raw data processing was performed with SPSS for Windows 16.00 (IBM SPSS, Chicago, IL). One of the conditions for the use of statistical tests to compare means, correlation analysis and linear multiple regression analysis is the normality of distributions of interest variables. The normality of scores for DIFS, SWLS, MSLSS and BDI-FS was evaluated by calculating the values of *skewness* (symmetry) and *kurtosis* (i.e., tailedness). Values must not be less than - 1 or greater than + 1, where we can consider the distribution of a variable as quasi-normal (Morgan et al., 2004)

The comparison of the scores distributions means for the well-being indicators according to the gender of adolescents who participated in the study was performed using the *t*-Student test for two independent samples. The critical threshold value for determining statistical significance was fixed at $p = 0.05$ (two-tailed). For significant differences, the effect size was estimated by calculating the value of the coefficient *d* proposed by J. Cohen (1992). The qualitative benchmarks for the effect size interpretation were as follows: 0.20 – low effect size, 0.50 – moderate effect size and 0.80 – high effect size.

Predictive models were tested using linear hierarchical regression analysis (Labăr, 2008). All models included the constant in the regression equation. For each of the models, independent variables related to the gender and age of adolescents were to be introduced in the first stage (if, in preliminary analyses, they showed significant relationships with dependent variables). In the second stage, the independent variables relating to self-differentiation in the family-of-origin were to be added. Because comparative analyses revealed a significant effect from adolescent gender on depression score, in the hierarchical linear regression analysis in which the depression score was the dependent variable, adolescent gender was introduced as an independent variable in both the first and second stage. To ease data interpretation, gender was recoded into a *dummy* variable: 1 = girls and 0 = boys/reference category. In order to make the regression models more efficient regarding the number of independent variables with predictive role and explanatory power, only independent quantitative variables were introduced which have revealed correlations $\geq |\pm 0.30|$ with dependent variables. The unique contributions of the independent variables highlighted as predictors to explaining the variance of the dependent variables were estimated by calculating the square of the value of the semi-partial correlation (r_{sp}^2) and the transformation of the obtained result into percentage values (Labăr, 2008).

5. Results

5.1. Preliminary analyses

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for the distributions of the variables used in the study.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of the variables used in the study

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Skewness</i>	<i>Kurtosis</i>
Adolescent-mother differentiation	2044.74	505.17	- 0.63	- 0.12
Adolescent-father differentiation	1948.01	545.58	- 0.46	- 0.37
Satisfaction_family	4.78	0.79	- 0.91	1.01
Satisfaction_friends	4.79	0.73	- 0.67	0.71
Satisfaction_school	4.11	0.88	- 0.49	- 0.28
Satisfaction_self	4.79	0.54	- 0.78	1.32
Satisfaction_overall (SWLS)	24.58	5.27	- 0.55	- 0.25
Depression	2.67	2.71	1.73	5.64

Except for satisfaction with family and depression, the values of the *skewness* and *kurtosis* indicators were acceptable, ranging between [- 1; + 1]. For almost all variables of interest (except for depression), distributions showed negative asymmetries, i.e. high values. The family satisfaction variable showed a more pronounced negative asymmetry. The school satisfaction average score was somewhat lower than the average for the other three areas of satisfaction. However, it was in the area of moderate values. Of the domains that have been operationalized by administering the MSLSS instrument, self-satisfaction has revealed the most homogeneous distribution. This can be seen from both the lowest value of standard deviation and the high value of the *kurtosis* indicator. For the overall satisfaction with life, the adolescent-mother differentiation, respectively the adolescent-father differentiation, the average scores ranged between moderate to high values. Regarding depression, the distribution of the score showed a more pronounced positive asymmetry. This result means the tendency of the participants to get a low score for this indicator of the subjective well-being. Regarded as a whole, the descriptive data did not indicate problematic deviations from the normality characteristic of variable distributions that will be subjected to multivariate statistical processing.

5.2. Comparative data

Compared to boys, girls have obtained slightly higher means for satisfaction with family life, school and self-satisfaction (Table 2). However, these differences were not statistically significant

($p = 0.213-0.748$). Also, for satisfaction with friends, the difference between boys and girls was not significant ($p = 0.724$).

Table 2. Comparative data by adolescents' gender

Dependent variables	Subsamples	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i> -Student	<i>p</i>
Satisfaction_family	Boys	4.76	0.79	- 0.32	0.748
	Girls	4.80	0.80		
Satisfaction_friends	Boys	4.81	0.70	0.35	0.724
	Girls	4.77	0.76		
Satisfaction_school	Boys	4.01	0.85	- 1.24	0.213
	Girls	4.19	0.90		
Satisfaction_self	Boys	4.77	0.62	- 0.35	0.722
	Girls	4.80	0.48		
Satisfaction_overall (SWLS)	Boys	25.51	4.64	1.95	0.053
	Girls	23.92	5.60		
Depression	Boys	2.00	1.73	- 2.95	0.004
	Girls	3.14	3.15		

Note: $n = 66$ boys; $n = 94$ girls

For overall satisfaction with life, boys achieved a mean score higher than girls by one and a half points, but the difference was at the limit of statistical significance ($p = 0.053$). In contrast, for depression, the difference between girls and boys was statistically significant ($p = 0.004$). However, the magnitude of the effect was moderate ($d = 0.43$). The boys scored between 0 and 6. More than three-quarters of them achieved scores ≤ 3 . The girls scored between 0 and 18. More than half of them achieved scores ≤ 3 . However, neither the girls nor the boys have reported scores for depression to place them in high-risk groups.

5.3. Correlational analysis

Correlations between adolescent age and subjective well-being indicators were not statistically significant ($p = 0.354-0.751$) and had negligible values. Instead, all the correlations between the score obtained by adolescents for the two dimensions of self-differentiation and the indicators of well-being were statistically significant ($p < 0.001$). Absolute correlation values ranged between 0.33 and 0.57 - for the adolescent-mother differentiation, respectively between 0.34 and 0.61 for adolescent-father differentiation (Table 3). Correlations with life satisfaction scores were positive and with depression scores were negative. The high levels of self-differentiation in dyadic relationships between adolescents and each parent were associated with high levels of satisfaction

with family, friends, school, self, and overall satisfaction with life, respectively with a low level of cognitive and affective symptoms of depression.

Table 3. Pearson correlations between self-differentiation, life satisfaction and depression in participants

Variables	Adolescent-mother differentiation (composite score)	Adolescent-father differentiation (composite score)
Satisfaction_family	0.57	0.61
Satisfaction_friends	0.41	0.39
Satisfaction_school	0.45	0.45
Satisfaction_self	0.37	0.34
Satisfaction_overall (SWLS)	0.37	0.39
Depression	- 0.33	- 0.36

Note: All correlations were significant at $p < 0.001$

The correlation between scores for the two dimensions of self-differentiation was 0.56 ($p < 0.001$). This detail is important because one of the conditions for carrying out multiple linear regression analysis is the absence of multicollinearity between the independent variables to be introduced in the model (Labăr, 2008). If the multicollinearity is not checked, the regression model can be distorted, especially in terms of predictive power.

5.4. Multiple linear regression models

The regression model in which the independent variables were the dimensions related to adolescent self-differentiation in relational pairs with parents, and the dependent variable was satisfaction with family was statistically significant ($R = 0.66$, $p < 0.001$). Both adolescent-mother ($\beta = 0.31$; $p < 0.001$) and adolescent-father differentiation ($\beta = 0.41$; $p < 0.001$) were positive predictors of satisfaction with family. The first of the independent variables explained 6.45% of the variance of satisfaction with family and the second 11.15%.

Also, the regression model with satisfaction with friends as the dependent variable was statistically significant ($R = 0.45$; $p < 0.001$). Both dimensions of adolescent self-differentiation were positive predictors of satisfaction with friends: for adolescent-mother differentiation – $\beta = 0.27$ and $p < 0.01$; for adolescent-father differentiation – $\beta = 0.23$ and $p < 0.05$. Adolescent-mother differentiation explained 4.70% of the variance of satisfaction with friends, while the adolescent-father differentiation explained 3.38%.

The regression model in which the dependent variable was satisfaction with school was statistically significant ($R = 0.50$, $p < 0.001$). Both adolescent-mother differentiation ($\beta = 0.29$; $p < 0.01$) and adolescent-father differentiation ($\beta = 0.28$; $p < 0.01$) were positive predictors of satisfaction with school. The first of the independent variables explained 5.15% of the variance of satisfaction with school, and the second 5.01%.

The regression model in which the dependent variable was satisfaction with one's own person was statistically significant ($R = 0.40$; $p < 0.001$). Both dimensions of self-differentiation were positive predictors of satisfaction that adolescents expressed towards their own person. For the two independent variables, regression coefficient values were $\beta = 0.26$ and $p < 0.01$, respectively $\beta = 0.18$ and $p < 0.05$. Adolescent-mother differentiation explained 4.32% of the variance of satisfaction with oneself, and the adolescent-father differentiation 2.13%.

When the dependent variable was overall satisfaction with life, the regression model was statistically significant ($R = 0.42$; $p < 0.001$). Both dimensions of adolescent self-differentiation in the context of the emotional and social experiences lived in the family-of-origin were positive predictors of global satisfaction with life. For the two independent variables, regression coefficient values were $\beta = 0.21$ and $p < 0.05$, respectively $\beta = 0.27$ and $p < 0.01$. The first of the variables explained 2.72% of the variance of overall satisfaction with life, and the second 4.62%.

To test the last of the working hypotheses we used the hierarchical multiple linear regression analysis. The regression model outlined in the first stage of the analysis was statistically significant ($R = 0.21$; $p < 0.01$). Adolescent gender was a positive predictor ($\beta = 0.21$; $p < 0.01$) for the depression score, explaining 4.36% of the variance. In the second stage of the analysis, there were added the dimensions of adolescent differentiation in the context of emotional and social experiences in their families, resulting in a statistically significant pattern ($R = 0.43$; $p < 0.001$). The added independent variables significantly increased the explanatory power of the model ($\Delta R^2 = 0.143$; $p < 0.001$). Adolescent gender remained a positive predictor ($\beta = 0.19$; $p < 0.05$) of depression, while adolescent-mother differentiation ($\beta = -0.20$; $p < 0.05$) and adolescent-father differentiation ($\beta = -0.22$; $p < 0.05$) were negative predictors. In the final model, adolescent gender explained 3.57% of the dependent variable variance, while the adolescent-mother differentiation, respectively adolescent-father differentiation explained 2.52%, respectively 3.06%.

6. Discussions

There is a rich literature on the impact that poor family functioning and family-related negative events have on adolescent well-being. For example, in a series of studies, Shek (1997a, b, 1998, 2002a) reported negative correlations between indicators of adolescent-parent conflicts and poor functioning of the family, on the one hand, and Chinese adolescent satisfaction with life, on the other. Moreover, the increasing level of conflict that marks relations between adolescents and parents, and the poor functioning of the family, are consistent predictors of increasing mental health problems and behavioural difficulties, impairment of school performance, and increased risk of engaging in delinquent behaviours or abuse of substances such as alcohol or illegal drugs (Shek 1997a, 2002a; Suldo and Huebner, 2004). In other studies, the positive perceptions that adolescents had about parents' qualities, parenting styles, and the functioning of relational pairs with them were predictors of high levels of satisfaction with life (Shek, 1999a, b, c; 2002b).

Drawing on the systemic perspective developed by M. Bowen, the present study aims to investigate the relationship between self-differentiation in the relational and emotional experiences that adolescents live in their families and the indicators of positive well-being. In the investigated group, the distribution of satisfaction with family showed a more pronounced negative asymmetry. This result could be explained by the importance that adolescents still give to the experiences they live with their family. These experiences can mark their development (Steinberg, 2001). Self-satisfaction revealed the most homogeneous distribution. The result could be explained by the adolescent tendency to attach great importance to assessing their own qualities. Although some may tend to overestimate their own qualities and skills, it is recognized that, after the decline in image and self-esteem characteristic of small and middle-school ages, with the transition from middle school to high school, the two components of the social self tend to improve (Harter, 1999). Enhancing autonomy and participation in social groups of age peers as well as moving to a new stage of schooling allows the adolescent to use more and more opportunities to engage in activities and conduct where he/she is competent and appreciated by adults and peers. Benefiting from constant support from family, teachers, and peers, the adolescent can increase confidence in their own strengths and self-esteem while building a more stable and positive self-image. For overall satisfaction with life, the average score that the adolescents surveyed achieved was in the moderate to high values range. This result is consistent with the data reported in other American adolescents (Huebner, Drane and Valois, 2000), Koreans (Park and Huebner, 2005) or Angolan, Portuguese-African and Indian migrants who emigrated with their families to Portugal (Neto, 2001). Finally, the descriptive data indicated that about half of the adolescents who participated in the study obtained a BDI-FS score less than

2.00. This result can be explained by the non-clinical nature of the sample of adolescents who participated in our study.

The lack of differences between boys and girls, in terms of satisfaction with various aspects of life and overall satisfaction are consistent with the findings of other studies. Studies on samples of children and adolescents from various countries (Asian, European or North American) have shown that demographic variables (e.g. gender, age, racial *background* or socio-economic status) have a very modest contribution to predicting satisfaction with life. The studies to which we refer have focused on both the satisfaction with various areas of everyday life and the overall satisfaction with life, and have used the best-known single and multidimensional instruments for measuring satisfaction with life (for a comprehensive review, see Gilman and Huebner, 2003). Generally, the average score for overall life satisfaction and across different areas of functioning is above the neutral points of the response scales. These results suggest that most children and adolescents are satisfied with their lives when assessing them globally or segmentally. Probably, meeting basic needs plays an important role in assessments made by children and adolescents about their own lives.

For both dimensions of self-differentiation in relational pairs with parents, correlations with satisfaction with family, friends, and school were somewhat higher than correlations with self-satisfaction, overall satisfaction with life, and the intensity of depression symptoms. Family, school, and groups of friends are three very important environments in adolescent socialization self-identity configuration. But, of all these, the family plays the main role, because affective relationships are usually strong and impress upon the individual functioning of all members of a family system. A consistent body of studies suggests that even when the *pattern* of interactions between children and parents is altered by various difficulties or vulnerabilities, the relationship with parents remains an important social and emotional resource that puts its mark on the quality of development of children and adolescents (Anderson Moore and Zaff, 2002; Silverberg, Tennenbaum and Jacob, 1992; Steinberg, 2001). The impact that affective and relational experiences and family life experiences have on the development, psychosocial adaptation, and well-being of adolescents is also reflected in their ability to integrate into groups of friends and manage school tasks.

Among the concepts and family processes on which the systemic theory proposed by Bowen was based, self-differentiation is considered a key element for the transition to the age of youth and then to adulthood (Carter and McGoldrick, 1989; Knauth and Skowron, 2004). The *pattern* of family system functioning and emotional and communication relationships can either contribute

positively to, or hinder the transition of an adolescent to adulthood. An important role is played by the support that parents give to the adolescent in order to achieve a balance between their individuality and the autonomy to which they aspire, namely maintaining social and emotional anchors in relationships with other family members and authentic participation in family life (Carter and McGoldrick, 1989). Well-differentiated adolescents in terms of self-identity operate with a distinctive definition of their own skills, beliefs, interests, aspirations or values. They autonomously choose the directions they want to follow in life, without this meaning that they do not consider the suggestions of parents or other people who can play a significant role in the development path. Having confidence in their own skills, in others and in the future, they easily adapt to adolescence-specific requests, being appreciated as such in friends and school groups. On the contrary, poorly differentiated adolescents are characterized by the absence of a defined identity and, especially in times when families face stressful events or difficulties in the process of communication, they are "caught" by the emotional wave that strikes the entire family system. This leads to chronic anxiety, a sense of insecurity and lack of self-confidence, and other psychological problems. When psychosocial difficulties thrive over time and cause other complications, the risk of deteriorating well-being increases.

The data we obtained by performing multiple linear regression analysis confirmed all the working hypotheses. Differentiation of self in the context of family experiences explained between 2.13% and 11.15% of the variance of the subjective well-being indicators. This result confirms that, apart from the differences in the mechanisms of influence, both parents are important for the development and personal growth of an adolescent. However, a careful analysis of predictive data allows us to note that the two dimensions of adolescent self-differentiation in relational pairs with parents had different explanatory powers. For example, when the dependent variables were satisfaction with family, overall satisfaction with life, depression intensity, adolescent-father differentiation had a higher explanatory power compared to the strength shown for adolescent-mother differentiation. In contrast, in regression models where the dependent variables were satisfaction with friends and self-satisfaction, the adolescent-mother differentiation had a higher explanatory power compared to the power obtained for the adolescent-father differentiation. A possible explanation for these differences includes the different perceptions adolescents have about mothers and fathers in terms of parenting roles. Thus, mothers may be perceived to be more accessible and more available in the context of emotional communication, more expressive and attentive to the needs of identity crystallization and autonomy in decisions, which adolescents assert in the context of family interactions, often in a conflict. In contrast, when it comes to groups of friends, mothers tend to be more intrusive and more intransigent than

fathers. At the same time, fathers may be perceived as more concerned with ensuring material and physical security of the family and more authoritative in negotiating delicate issues that may arise as a result of stating the specific needs that adolescents have.

Our study should be regarded considering certain limits. The sample size of adolescents was relatively modest. This should be related to the power of the statistical tests used for the exploitation of quantitative data, as well as to the possible inflation of the values of the correlations between the variables of interest (Popa, 2008). In future studies, we propose a preliminary estimate of the sample size that would be needed to achieve a statistical power > 0.80 , a statistical threshold < 0.001 and at least a moderate effect size. In addition, the sample of participants included adolescents who, for the most part, were urban residents and came from families with at least middle socio-economic status. In future studies, we propose the use of randomly selected samples that are heterogeneous and representative of the adolescent population in Romania in terms of their residence environment, family socio-economic status, and other relevant demographic variables.

Another limit is the possibility that the significant associations that we found between the variables related to adolescent self-differentiation in relational pairs with parents and the indicators of well-being actually may represent false effects due to: a) the style that adolescents have used in the choice of the answers to the questionnaires and b) the common variance method, on which the calculation of the correlations between the variables of interest and, implicitly, the linear multiple regression analyses was based. Of course, this methodological issue is intrinsic to any correlative study.

Because, in the present study, evaluations of self-differentiation in the context of the experiences lived in the family-of-origin were based only on adolescents' perspective (that was explored by analysing responses to the DIFS instrument), we believe it might be relevant to take into account the perspective that the parents of adolescents have on the same "dyadic reality". The administration of the DIFS instrument among parents would allow both the validation of the accuracy of the adolescents' representations about their own family experiences and the triangulation of the findings that, in this study, were reached based only on the reports of adolescents.

The present study did not examine the mechanisms that could explain the associations between adolescent self-differentiation in relational pairs with parents and indicators of subjective well-being. For example, what are the variables that may explain the differences that we have found between the two dimensions of adolescent self-differentiation in relational pairs with mothers or fathers in terms of their effects on satisfaction with life, family, relationships with

friends or with themselves? Thus, for boys, we can assume that certain variables related to self-representation, such as self-efficacy or self-esteem, mediate relationships between the level of adolescent-mother and adolescent-father differentiation, on the one hand, and the satisfaction they have with their own person, on the other hand.

An important limit is the correlative nature of the *design* underlying the study (the variables of interest were measured concurrently). This has not allowed us to interpret the results in terms of causality. In future studies, we intend to use a longitudinal *design*. Such a design implies multiple measurement sequences and will allow us to capture, in time, the dynamics of the relationship between the specific processes taking place in the adolescent's family and the well-being of the adolescent. In addition, we must also take into account the findings of several studies conducted on samples of adolescents in China (Chang et al., 2003), South Korea (Park, 2005), Israel (Ullman and Tatar, 2001) and USA (Suldo and Huebner, 2004), that suggest that overall satisfaction with life tends to enter a slight decline with the onset and progress of adolescence. Therefore, using a longitudinal *design* could help us to explore whether the difficulties in affirming their own identity, through the transactions that family experiences generate, are one of the causes of the decline in indicators of the subjective well-being among adolescents.

7. Practical implications

In contrast to the explanations that have emphasized the role that certain individual factors (such as genetic or psychological vulnerabilities) play in the development and adaptation of adolescents, ecological models (influenced by the perspective outlined by U. Bronfenbrenner) suggest that more analysis is needed on how different social contexts or microsystems (e.g. family, peers, or school) could influence the development of adolescents (Crockett and Silbereisen, 2000). The development of an adolescent and the *status* of psychological and social functioning are intimately linked to the affective and relational experiences he or she lives inside his family system (Anderson Moore and Zaff, 2002; Steinberg, 2001). The results of our investigation suggest the importance that efforts aimed at changing the dyadic processes governing a family system have for therapeutic interventions on vulnerable adolescents and their families. Most adolescents seeking psychotherapeutic support encounter emotional, behavioural, and adaptive problems that reflect a wide range of intrafamilial difficulties. Therefore, there is a need for a broader approach to the factors that contribute to adolescent adaptation to developmental tasks and the *status* of his mental health and well-being.

Counsellors and psychotherapists assisting vulnerable adolescents and their parents rely on the premise supported by empirical evidence that family processes and the quality of family life are important factors in recovery, increased adaptability and positive development of adolescents (Carter and McGoldrick, 1989; Meyer, 1998; Nichols, 2003). Adolescents seeking psychological assistance for various emotional problems caused by family stress and/or difficulties in adapting to daily tasks of functioning and development can benefit from therapy focused on reconfiguring the functioning of the family-of-origin. M. Bowen imagined systemic family therapy as an intervention designed to diminish the emotional reactivity specific to people with a poorly differentiated self, and to facilitate a better awareness of the forces anchored in everyday life that operate in the family system (McGoldrick and Carter, 2001). Therefore, a first direction of intervention could focus on stimulating adolescent interest in his or her family history, as well as awareness of the impact that certain key family events or interaction patterns have had on his/her own functioning (Meyer, 1998). Subsequently, the adolescent may be helped to understand the principles and benefits of self-differentiation in the context of emotional and relational experiences lived within the family. The adolescent may also be encouraged to enrich contacts with other family members, along with (Meyer, 1998): a) identifying the family triangles in which they participate due to strong emotional impregnation and lack of self-differentiation, and b) freeing themselves from the constraints these impose on them.

Gradually, the adolescent will get to take responsibility for the roles he / she may play in solving the life problems he or she encounters. Moreover, he or she will formulate his / her own life principles that had been neglected before therapy due to the high level of anxiety and efforts directed rather at obtaining approval from other family members than towards self-differentiation and assertion of individuality. The adolescent should be aware that when he or she strengthens self-differentiation compared to other family members but remains in permanent and genuine contact with them, other family members will strive to increase the differentiation of the family system (Meyer, 1998). Thus, some of the prerequisites are created to diminish the emotional difficulties that the adolescent encounters in the context of the in-family experiences and thereby provide a solid basis for the growth and maintenance of the well-being of all family members.

8. Conclusions

The importance of understanding the protective and vulnerable factors that may interfere with the psychosocial maturity of adolescents is justified by the difficulties many adolescents encounter at this transition age. These are reported by parents, teachers, school counsellors, researchers, as

well as by mental health specialists or those working on the community-based services network. Difficulties in adolescent development are most often reflected in poor adaptation to age-specific tasks. Lack of aspirations and prospects for one's future, poor school results, the risk of premature abandonment, involvement in delinquent behaviour, mental health problems, etc. calls for the need for specialized help for adolescents.

The study we conducted examined the relationship between self-differentiation in the dynamics of emotional relationships and the experiences that adolescents live in their families, namely life satisfaction and depression level as indicators of subjective well-being. Multiple linear regression analysis data provided empirical support for all working hypotheses. Beyond the methodological limitations inherent in any study, the results we have obtained confirm the findings of other studies on adolescent samples from China, South Korea, Italy, USA or the UK. They support the need to intensify efforts aimed at reconfiguring the basics of the functioning of the family system in which an adolescent is anchored.

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C. Nechifor, A. Sandovici, V. Robu/ *Journal of Innovation in Psychology, Education and Didactics*

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