

# PSYCHOLOGICAL DIFFERENTIATION AND THE RISE OF THE MODERN FAMILY

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## ABSTRACT

*The hypothesis here advanced is that in the Western world a historical process of 'psychological differentiation' has taken place. It is suggested that individuals have become more complex psychologically, that greater inter-individual psychological differences have emerged, and that the adult psychological development has become less predictable. The process is presumed to have started at the end of the Middle Ages and to have developed at an increasing rate, being most forceful at the present time. Support for these assumptions is presented. Next, on the basis of these assumptions, new explanations of some historical changes in the field of marriage and family life are put forward. It is shown that the increase in intimacy and in privatisation as well as the decrease of household size and of marital stability can to some extent be understood to be the result of a growing psychological differentiation.*

## 1 INTRODUCTION

We know that marriage and family life have changed profoundly during the last two centuries. The change from traditional to modern family patterns has been extensively described by e.g. Aries (1962), Kooy (1957) and Shorter (1975). Though different in emphasis, these studies present a coherent picture. External control on mate selection and marital behavior declined, love and sexuality came to be emphasized, domesticity increased at the cost of public life, the nuclear family became more dominant, more people got married, and marital stability began to decline. Considerable regional and social class differences have been observed, but in spite of abundant variety, these trends can be recognized all over the western world.

We know fairly well *what* has happened in the field of family life, but our knowledge about the *why* of these developments is still very limited. Some interesting theories have been proposed: It has been suggested that the rise of the modern family was the result of industrialisation; that it came forth from the rise of the bourgeoisie and that it was facilitated by the decline of the church. The picture is far from complete however. These theories do not account for the fact that some aspects of family modernisation preceded modernisation in other fields. Nor do they provide a satisfactory answer to the burning question of why marriage has become less stable.

The purpose of this paper is to stimulate thinking in this field. It introduces a new psycho-historic explanation of the developments. It rather serves as an amplification. The essence of the explanation is the hypothesis that a process of

psychological differentiation has taken place in the Western world. It is demonstrated that such a hypothesis would allow for a new view of the causal factors in the process of family change. This explanation does not contradict current socio-historic theories.

## 2 WHAT IS PSYCHOLOGICAL DIFFERENTIATION?

Developmental psychologists commonly use the term "psychological differentiation" to denote the degree of complexity of the mental functioning of a person. In this paper the term is given a broader meaning. It covers three different, though related, phenomena:

- 1) the psychological complexity of individuals (intra-psychological differentiation);
- 2) the degree to which individuals in a population differ from each other psychologically (inter-psychological differentiation) and
- 3) the degree to which the psychological development of individuals in a population follows a different pattern (developmental differentiation).

### 2.1 Intra psychological differentiation

All systems are characterized by some differentiation: even the most rudimentary systems. This is implicit in the very definition of the word "system". However, systems differ in their degree of differentiation. Some are characterized by a relatively homogeneous structural state, others by a relatively heterogeneous state. This formal characteristic of systems is known to be related to specialized functioning. Differentiation implies the emergence of sub-systems within the general system, capable of mediating specific functions' which cannot be carried out - or are performed in a more primitive way - by the undifferentiated system as a whole. The concept of differentiation applies to all systems: biological, social and psychological.

The concept of (intra)psychological differentiation has been worked out by Witkin et al. (1962). They describe it as a greater degree of structuring of experience, which necessitates a more distinct separation between the self and the external world, and the development of more discrete areas within the self. Feeling and perceiving move further apart, the distance between thinking and acting widens, impulses become more canalized, values more internalized, feelings and needs more discrete, etc.

Witkin et al. discern three operational indicators of psychological differentiation:

- a) "articulation of the outside world" (measured by perceptual tests),
- b) "articulation of self" (clearly defined body concept and a sense of separate identity),  
and
- c) "specialized, structured defense mechanisms" (intellectualization and sublimation rather than massive repression and primitive denial).

Witkin et al. demonstrated that a considerable co-variation exists between these indicators. On the basis of that finding they conclude that psychological differentiation represents a "pervasive pattern of personality organisation".

In further studies Witkin et al. demonstrated that psychological differentiation increases with age and remains a fairly stable personality characteristic throughout life. They identified several factors which favor the development of psychological differentiation in children. In a later article Witkin presents more empirical evidence for the validity of this concept (Witkin 1965).

## 2.2 Inter-psychological differentiation

The concept of an inter-psychological differentiation does not deal with differences *within* people, but with differences *among* people. It denotes the degree to which individuals in a population differ in basic personality traits. The concept presupposes that cultures may differ in the degree of psychological uniformity they produce in their members, for example, as a result of differences in socialization or of differences in pressures towards conformity.

I do not know of earlier use of this concept, though this meaning is addressed in some notions of 'individualisation'.

## 2.3 Developmental differentiation

Human psychological development fairly follows a universal pattern consisting of distinct stages, the sequence of which is almost invariable. Though psychological development is fairly predictable therefore, the degree of predictability is not always the same. Cultures prescribing in detail how a person of a certain age should think, feel and behave, leave less room for developmental variation than cultures which do not. Furthermore, cultures may restrict psychological development to the "lower" stages, which in itself implies a lower developmental variation and which reduces the greater variability currently presumed to be inherent to the "higher" developmental levels.

I will label this phenomenon as the degree of "developmental differentiation" in a population. Like the concept of "inter-psychological differentiation" the concept of "developmental differentiation" has not been coined earlier.

## 3 IS THERE A TREND TOWARDS GREATER PSYCHOLOGICAL DIFFERENTIATION?

Implicit in many historical writings is the suggestion that people in mediaeval times were more simpleminded than the average modern man, and that, in those times people were more alike in their thoughts and feelings. Weinstein & Piatt (1969:215) for example write that in modern pluralized societies, psychic structures are more differentiated than ever before and that individuals are under constant pressure to become even more differentiated.

It is difficult to assess whether such suggestions adequately reflect historical reality. At the theoretical level we could easily imagine they do, but at the empirical level convincing evidence is hard to provide. We cannot subject our forefathers to psychological tests. At best we can make inferences from written documents or we can study present day cultures which we believe to share characteristics with our cultural past. As we will see, some of such investigations have indeed yielded indications for a trend towards greater psychological differentiation. Moreover some better established historical facts can be used as indirect evidence: It can be argued that they have favored a trend towards greater psychological differentiation.

Below we will take stock of this scattered evidence for each of the three forms of psychological differentiation mentioned above.

### 3.1 Have people become more complex?

Intra-psychological differentiation is the result of developmental processes. As already noted, these processes follow to some extent an innate pattern. So far they show no historical variation and are not likely to produce differences in complexity. The developmental process is not wholly biologically determined however. Socio-cultural factors play an indispensable role and heavily influence the direction and degree of

mental growth. As Keniston (1971:342) puts it: "Some societies may "create" stages of life that do not exist in other societies; some societies may "stop" human development in some sectors far earlier than other societies "choose to do". In this respect historical differences in intra-psychological differentiation are quite possible. The following ideas suggest that in the last few centuries Western man has indeed become more complex psychologically:

#### *Individualisation.*

It is a common idea that since the middle ages a process of "individualisation" has taken place. A stronger sense of personal autonomy developed and people began to perceive the boundaries between themselves and their environment more accurately. This development has been described by e.g. Aries (1974), Elias (1969) and by Weinstein & Platt (1969). This development is generally thought to have had wide repercussions. At the ideological level on the retreat of collectivistic philosophies, at the political level on the rise of democracy and at the economic level on the emergence of capitalism. As to the causes of this trend towards independence various suggestions have been advanced, such as changing rearing conditions, the market economy, fewer identification ties in a rapidly changing society, etc.

All these observations about "individualisation" or "personal autonomy" come very close to one of Witkin's indicators of intra-psychological differentiation. In Witkin's words: "the articulation of self" seems to have increased. As this indicator tends to correlate closely with Witkin's two other indicators of intra-psychological differentiation (at least in present day society) we can interpret the observed trend towards individualisation as a sign that people have indeed become more complex psychologically.

#### *Internalisation of Values*

In the process of modernisation the emphasis in social control shifted from enforcement by "shame" to enforcement by "guilt". Values are increasingly internalized and the social control on overt behavior lessened. This development has been amply described by e.g. Elias (1969).

Also this development comes close to Witkin's description of intra-psychological differentiation. Witkin et al. explicitly mention "internalisation of values" as an aspect of "psychological differentiation" (p. 14/5).

#### *Canalisation of impulses.*

Another side of this same development concerns impulse management. In his "Über den Prozess der Zivilisation" Elias (1969) draws a vivid picture of a trend towards greater differentiation, inhibition and canalisation of emotional impulses. In his own words: "Mit der Differenzierung des gesellschaftlichen Gewebes wird auch die soziogene psychische Selbstkontrolle-Apparatur differenzierter, allseitiger und stabiler" (Band II, p. 316).

Again we meet a phenomenon that Witkin et al. mention as an aspect of intra-psychological differentiation (p. 14). In particular, the use of specialized defense mechanism rather than primitive denial is used by them as an operational indicator of their concept: an indicator they have shown to be empirically related to other indicators of intra-psychological differentiation as well. Therefore also this observation of Elias can be taken as evidence of a historical trend towards greater intra-psychological differentiation. Since the strategies which the individual employs in canalizing his emotions are known to effect the outcome of the developmental process, it is likely that this change in impulse management has contributed in its turn to further psychological differentiation.

### *Extension of childhood*

Aries (1962) has introduced the idea that the developmental phases of puberty and adolescence are products of modernisation. Though this view has been considerably nuanced by later research (e.g. Peeters 1975) it is clear that differences between adults and children have become increasingly emphasized and that children currently spend a far greater part of their time in special education settings.

This development can be seen both as a result and as a determinant of greater intra-psychological differentiation. It can be seen as a result when we say that the greater mental complexity required an extension of the developmental period. We can see it as a cause when we say that a longer childhood period will probably result in more intra-psychological differentiation, because it provides more time and opportunity for varied mental experimentation and for accumulation of knowledge. It is beyond doubt that the modern educational system at least produces a higher level of cognitive differentiation.

These two views are quite compatible and they both suggest a growing mental complexity through the centuries.

### *New rearing techniques*

In our more recent history the behavior of parents and teachers towards children has changed profoundly. This development has been described, among others, by Aries (1974) and by DeMause (1974). Though the process was far from continuous and though great differences can be shown to have existed, child rearing can be said to have become increasingly affectionate. Further it is clear that the traditional patterns of blind coercion and indulgence have gradually declined and that children were more and more encouraged to display initiative and independence.

Again we meet similar phenomena in a study of Witkin et al. Investigating differences in the behavior of mothers of high and low differentiated children, these very elements of the modern rearing pattern turned out to be associated with a high intra-psychological differentiation. Thus it is not improbable that the pedagogic revolution has had a pervasive effect in the progress towards a greater intra-psychological differentiation. This argument seems stronger still when we consider the solid institutional basis these rearing practices have found in the rapidly growing educational sector during the last few decades. The fact that the full impact of these new pedagogic ideas was felt only after compulsory education had been introduced, suggests that the development towards greater model mental complexity may have followed a concave pattern, the greatest acceleration taking place in the present century.

## **3.2 Have individuals become more diverse?**

The idea that psychological differences among people have augmented during the last centuries is less common than the notion of growing individual complexity. In fact several writers have taken a reversed position. Elias (1969), Riesman (1953) and Marcuse (1968) rather suggest that modern man is becoming increasingly uniform. Though it is beyond doubt that the modern industrialized society has introduced powerful manipulative tools and that it has created strong economic and political dependencies, it is not certain that modernisation has produced more uniformity in behavior. Even if this were true it would not necessarily follow that people are more alike psychologically. Uniformity at the behavioral level is not the same as uniformity at the personality level.

As will be shown below there are reasons to believe that interpersonal psychological differences have grown rather than declined. However, it must be admitted in advance, that the evidence for a trend toward inter-psychological

differentiation is weaker than the evidence for a trend toward intra-psychological differentiation we have just discussed. Direct empirical evidence is hardly available. I can do no more than make inferences based on more established historical facts. As social reality is complex enough to allow many plausible but contradicting interpretations, the propositions thus derived can hardly be taken for granted.

#### *Institutional differentiation*

We know that in the last few centuries a pervasive process of institutional differentiation has taken place. The small, simple, self-sufficient and rather uniform regional units of mediaeval society were gradually dissolved into a large and complex system of international division of labour where highly specialised organisations produce a great variety of commodities and services in enormous amounts. The term "modernisation" is often used to refer exclusively to the functional differentiation of the production system. However, similar developments took place in other fields as well: in administration, education, science, etc. Society became more pluralistic, while at the same time its parts became more interdependent. Durkheim (1893) was one of the first sociologists who recognized this development. Since then ample empirical evidence has been provided.

The differentiation of society probably implied that it came to set more diverse demands on its members, the various specialized institutions requiring different kinds of persons to fulfill different tasks. We can imagine that this development has weathered traditional pressures in favor of psychological uniformity and that in the different institutions different psychological qualities have been encouraged.

#### *Cultural differentiation*

Along with the growing differentiation of institutions we can also trace a well-documented differentiation in the fields of arts and science. An increasing variety of ideas in the fields of morals, politics and religion arose and produced an ever more chaotic panorama of disputes and denominations.

It is likely that this development has favored inter-psychological differentiation as well, the process of maturation becoming decreasingly characterized by the simple adoption of inherited views, but becoming instead a matter of selecting elements for oneself out of the wealth of conflicting philosophies and ideas. The increased demands on the individual in this process of constructing a picture of reality both require and enhance intra-psychological differentiation and obviously produce more differences among people.

#### *Intra-psychological differentiation*

As argued above in section 3.1 there are sound reasons to believe that people have become more complex. If this is true, does this also mean that people have become more different? Not necessarily of course: people may be highly complex, but nevertheless be very much alike. On the other hand it is easy to see that a high level of intra-psychological differentiation can be conducive to the emergence of greater interpersonal differences. The more various factors come to interact in the developmental process, the greater the variety of possible outcomes. Identity may serve as an example in this context: When somebody develops an idea about himself, this idea is likely to effect his further psychological development. Low self-esteem, for example, may give rise to the development of a very timid and dependent personality or sometimes to excessive self-assertion. The more pronounced this notion about the self, the greater its developmental consequences. As intra-psychological differentiation involves the crystallisation of more unique and discrete notions about oneself, it is likely to give rise to a greater variety and complexity of developmental scenario's and thus to result in a greater inter-psychological differentiation.

*Nuclearisation of the family*

We know that during the last few centuries the nuclear family has become more dominant and more closed. The very purpose of this paper is to explain that phenomenon. However, this not necessarily prevents us from using this same phenomenon as an independent variable in the context of this paragraph. The nuclearisation of the family can be seen to have been partly caused by the process of psychological differentiation and then to have further accelerated this process.

The rise of the nuclear family could have furthered inter-psychological differentiation in at least two ways: Firstly the nuclear family may have augmented interpersonal psychological differences by ensuring that children spend their early and most formative years in a more isolated setting. Thus child development became increasingly influenced by the specific psychological characteristics of their parents, especially those of their mother. Children became less subjected to the melting pot of influences of uncles, grandparents and neighbors. We can imagine this has produced more differences in early social experiences out of which greater personality differences subsequently emerged. A second thing is that the nuclear family tends to allow more freedom. Blitsen (1963:254) writes on this subject: "In corporate families the range of personal cultivation is curtailed. Autonomous nuclear families provide greater freedom for extensive and varied personal development

**3.3 Has psychological growth become less predictable?**

Human psychological development does not stop at a certain level of maturity. Psychological development is an ongoing process, a process which is known to become less predictable the further it has developed. Now a question related to the issues of the two foregoing ones is whether adult psychological development has remained unchanged in the course of time or that this aspect of psychological functioning has also been subject to a process of differentiation, leading to a greater diversity of developmental careers. Here again I have no direct empirical evidence at my disposal. At best I can say that if it is true that people have become more complex and more different, adult development is likely to have become more variable as well.

*Intra-psychological differentiation*

There are two reasons to believe that intra-psychological differentiation effects developmental differentiation positively: Firstly, a developmental process is less likely to follow a predictable pattern if more factors come into play. Psychological complexity implies that more different psychological factors affect the developmental process. Other conditions being equal, intra-psychological differentiation should thus give rise to a greater developmental differentiation. I used this same argument in discussing the relationship between intra- and inter-psychological differentiation in section 3.2. A second reason to believe that the growing mental complexity has resulted in more varied developmental careers is that human psychological development tends to become less uniform the further it advances. The further the development, the less subsequent growth is dictated by an innate program and the more the process develops its own dynamics. Since psychological complexity often goes together with functioning at these "higher" levels of maturity, the observed increase in intra-psychological differentiation probably has been accompanied by a growing developmental differentiation.

*Inter-psychological differentiation*

Next there are also two reasons why increased differences among individuals may have given rise to a greater variety of developmental careers. Developmental processes show

a greater variety of patterns the more diverse the initial situation they start from. In a population consisting of rather different individuals, we can thus expect more diverse developmental patterns to occur than in psychologically more homogeneous groups. Secondly, in the process of psychological development, processes of imitation and identification play a significant role. To some extent people model themselves on their image of others. If these "others" are highly similar psychologically, less diversity will come about than if the individual is confronted with many different personality types. Not only will there be a greater chance factor in the choice of identification models, but also the variety of different examples may lessen pressure towards conformity. Studies in this field have shown that the present of deviant examples greatly reduces such pressures.

#### *Norms and values*

Some works on life in former times embody the suggestion that traditional society maintained more rigid ideas about what people of a certain class, sex and age should think and feel. Whether this is true or not cannot be easily assessed, but anyway it is clear that individuality and freedom in the realm of personal psychological development have never been so glorified as it is in the present time. "Growth" and "self-actualisation" have come to be regarded as important virtues. Though the role of values in the developmental process should not be overestimated, it is likely that this normative change has also enhanced developmental differentiation.

### **3.4 To summarize**

Tentatively I advance the following hypotheses:

- 1) Since the Middle Ages people in the western world have become more complex psychologically.
- 2) Psychological differences between people have grown.
- 3) As a result of these trends, the course of adult psychological development has become less uniform.
- 4) These processes follow a curvilinear pattern. After a very gradual start in the highest urban social strata at the end of the Middle Ages they have continued at an accelerating rate and have spread through ever greater parts of the population. The greatest acceleration is taking place in the present century.

There is good evidence for the first hypothesis. The other three are rather more speculative. These hypotheses are not meant to suggest that modern man is "better" than traditional man. Psychological differentiation can be seen to have both its pros and its cons.

## **4 PSYCHOLOGICAL DIFFERENTIATION AND THE RISE OF THE MODERN FAMILY**

If we accept these hypotheses about a historical trend towards greater psychological differentiation, what could have been their consequences for family life? Has psychological differentiation been conducive to greater intimacy, smaller households, more equality in conjugal relations, etc.? We will never know for sure. Causality can hardly be demonstrated in the behavioral sciences and the difficulties are even greater when we are dealing with historical phenomena. At best we can assess whether we can imagine any plausible causal mechanism between phenomena occurring at the same



time. I will do so for each of the historical changes in family behavior mentioned in section 1 of this paper.

#### **4.1 More intimacy between spouses**

Has psychological differentiation given rise to greater conjugal intimacy? Positive effects of both intra- and inter-psychological differentiation could be imagined:

Inherent to greater psychological differentiation is a more crystallized sense of identity. The development and maintenance of identity is not always easy however; many people experience identity problems. In coping with these problems people need others. In order to recognize and differentiate their own feelings, preferences, plans and ideas they need the help of the words, reactions, experiences and judgements of other people. Such help can be found in all kind of casual contacts, in reading books and even in watching TV-stars. The most appropriate, however are the more intense and direct interpersonal contacts, especially contacts with people who are similar in many respects. Thus the search for identity usually involves intimate relationships of one sort or another, in which there is a great deal of sharing of experiences and perceptions as a means of validating one's own outlook on the world and of identifying the meaning that one has for others. In this manner the growing psychological complexity may have created need for "deeper" relationships, involving more psychological disclosure.

Marital relationships have some advantages in this context. Proximity, sexual intercourse and common interests will facilitate emotional expression. It seems that in the course of its development marriage has become more and more suited for this purpose; especially with the decline of arranged marriage. "Love match" means "personality match", the combination of two persons who experience sufficient congruency in major feelings and thoughts. Love is most significant for the purpose of identity formation in the early stages of adulthood. Not surprisingly people tend to be most involved in love during these years of transformation.

This view of the mate as an instrument for one's own psychological growth is in line with Shorters' (1975:15) observation that the desire for self-realisation was a motivating force in the emergence of romantic love. "For the couple, romance is a vehicle of self-exploration of their individual complexity". Romantic love figures thus as a consequence of intra-psychological differentiation. Noteworthy in this context is also, that the romantic notion of "self-disclosure" logically presupposes the awareness of being different. If everybody is similar, disclosure is meaningless. Romantic disclosure herewith appears not only as a consequence of intra-psychological differentiation but as a consequence of greater inter-psychological differentiation as well.

#### **4.2 Poorer outdoor social contacts**

The "fall of public man" (Scenett 1974) is usually explained as being a result of modern economic development, which favored rational, impersonal interpersonal behavior and which stressed competition rather than solidarity. My thesis of a growing interpsychological differentiation provides a complementary view of the same phenomenon.

Interpersonal attraction is greater when people are similar and better able to predict and understand each other's reactions (Newcomb 1961). Accordingly, when people become increasingly different psychologically, the chance of meeting somebody to whom they feel attracted decreases. As a result people probably came to derive less satisfaction from casual contacts with neighbors, uncles, shopkeepers and passers-by. This is perhaps one of the reasons why inter-personal intercourse in places of public resort such as pubs, brothels and public bathing establishments has dwindled (Halmoos 1962, Scenett 1974). The need for intimate interaction having increased rather than remaining constant, people thus became more dependent on those with whom they felt a

special psychological "fit". "Intimate" relationships therefore probably have become more important. Especially relationships with people one can select for their psychological characteristics, such as friends and a spouse.

### **4.3 Privatisation**

The decline of social control on conjugal behavior is traditionally ascribed to the decline of the Church, to urbanisation and to economic prosperity. I will not discuss the limitations of these explanations but show that this development can also to some extent be understood as the result of increased psychological differentiation.

First of all, intra-psychological differentiation has been shown to be associated with a relatively low degree of reliance on external sources in defining one's attitude (Witkin 1965:321). We may thus expect that the growing psychological complexity of people has made them less apt to obey current rules.

A second thing is that the traditional rules about proper marital behavior probably have become less functional. It is likely that the growing psychological differentiation has created greater variety and complexity in marital relations. When people become more complex, psychologically and when interpersonal psychological differences become greater while at the same time psychological matters become more essential to the relationship, we can imagine that the traditional uniformity in marital functioning disappears. As a result, the traditional rules in marital matters become inapt. It can then happen that couples are confronted with pressures which would ruin their marriage if they would give in to these pressures. These couples are then likely to withdraw: Away from the intrusive advices of the mother-in-law and away from the eyes of the neighbors. Seen in this light, the need for privacy may have emerged as a necessity rather than as a value.

A similar reasoning applies to changes in partner selection. Arranged marriage probably was more functional in times when people were more similar and predictable. Parents could make a match that worked. However, when as a result of psychological differentiation the demands spouses made on one another became more specific and psychological in nature, partner selection could no longer be done by the parents effectively. As such "love match" can also be seen to have emerged as a necessity rather than as an ideal.

### **4.4 Smaller households**

The growing dominance of nuclear households is usually explained as a consequence of greater social and geographic mobility and of higher standards of living. Plausibly, the trend towards psychological differentiation has also contributed to the process of nuclearisation.

The foregoing remarks suggest at least an indirect contribution: psychological differentiation induces a need for privacy. That need has in its turn probably favored smaller households. A direct effect of increased psychological differentiation can also be imagined: When people become more different psychologically, while at the same time psychological correspondence becomes more essential, it becomes less likely that one can get along with housemates one has not selected oneself on psychological criteria. Especially the woman who moves in with her husband's family is less likely to feel at ease. This is probably one of the reasons that young couples began to decide to live on their own and that they adopted a more selective attitude towards the lodging of elderly parents, unmarried siblings, boarders and servants.

### **4.5 Less marital stability**

The more recent trend towards declining marital stability has given rise to a great deal of speculation. I will not summarize the various explanations here, but merely observe

that an explanation based on an assumed increase in psychological differentiation has not been advanced as yet. Such an explanation seems very worthwhile however, because marital stability obviously has become more and more a psychological matter.

As indicated above the process of psychological differentiation probably has made psychological congruence and complementarity more essential for the perceived quality of the marital relationship. Accordingly marriage becomes more vulnerable when personalities change. The relationship being based on a rather exceptional psychological match, personality change takes away this very basis, unless the partners are subject to the same change. Now hypothesis 3 states that psychological development in adults has become (and is still becoming) less uniform. Consequently, there is an ever increasing chance that the spouses "grow away from each other". In that process the mutual understanding declines, which as we know is far more undermining for a marriage than failure to agree (Laing e.a. 1966). Consistent with this view is the recent longitudinal study of Bentler & Newcomb (1978) which found psychological congruency to be a strong predictor of marital stability and satisfaction

If we accept the theory that psychological differentiation has undermined marital stability, further explanations can be proposed for the explosive growth the number of divorces has shown during the last decades. We can then note that hypothesis 4 has suggested that the process of psychological differentiation follows a concave pattern. The greatest increase of psychological differentiation should be a rather recent phenomenon. The increase in the number of divorces is thus at least temporarily related to the increase of psychological differentiation.

Another thing is that two, somewhat less recent, phenomena may also have heightened the chance that psychological differences arise between marital partners. The first is that life-expectancy has increased, which makes that a marriage can cover more years. The longer a marriage exists, the greater the chance that the partners grow away from each other. A second source of mental differences between partners may lie in the lowering age of marriage. The younger the partners are at marriage, the greater the chance that maturation processes create differences between them.

#### **4.6 More variant family forms?**

Finally a remark about recent observations that more variant family forms are emerging (e.g. Cogswell 1975). Such a development seems understandable in the light of the arguments advanced above. If people become more complex and more different from each other, while psychological match becomes more essential at the same time, uniformity in family behavior becomes less likely. We may expect the development of a greater variety of life styles and of related family patterns. Moreover, if adult psychological growth does indeed start following more diverse roads, these family forms are subject to more changes during their life cycle.

Obviously this analysis of psychological factors in the process of family transformation is not exhaustive. I have not discussed the effects of a possible deterioration of the public mental health in the course of modernisation and neither have I dealt with the consequences of loneliness brought about by the historical processes of institutional- and psychological differentiation. However, the purpose of this paper was not to cover the whole field, but just to explore some consequences of the differentiation hypothesis.

## **5 CONCLUSION**

Though direct empirical evidence is limited, there is good reason to believe that a historical process towards psychological differentiation is taking place in the Western world. That process has probably started at the end of the Middle Ages and has

continued at an accelerating rate, being most forceful at the present day. Our psychological make up is becoming more and more complex, and interpersonal psychological differences become greater. Moreover the adult psychological development seems to become less predictable.

These assumptions have been shown to provide a powerful tool in explaining historical changes in the field of marriage and family life, such as these developments can plausible account for.

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