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### Abstract

Family is a unique relationship context that influences the contents and processes of identity. The identity of individuals emerges, at least in part, from being members of a family. Moreover, the family context influences not only the development of one's personal identity as a family member but also other aspects of personal identity. Family is not a neutral environment for identity development. On the contrary, it deeply affects the individual process, starting during adolescence, that leads to the development of one's identity (Grotevant & Cooper, 1986). In this chapter, first we briefly review the main theories that have tried to outline a definition of family, from which we have derived our own definition. Second, we analyze the concept of family identity. We address the topic of family identity at three different levels: (1) at the group level, which is the specific identity of the family as a group; (2) at the couple subsystem level, since the couple has its own identity and, thus, its own set of potentials to be pursued; (3) at the individual subsystem level, which is the component of individual identity that comes from being part of a specific family group. Finally, we aim to describe family members' identity processes and how they are affected by the family system and in particular by the process of mutual differentiation.

Family bonds are important in all human societies. The relational context of family is uniquely important in the study of identity processes: interdisciplinary perspectives have documented the

preeminent role that family plays in the acquisition of social understanding, caregiving, health, and well-being. In this chapter, we attempt to demonstrate that the family is a unique relationship context that influences the contents and processes of identity. The family has been studied from different theoretical perspectives such as sociology, anthropology, and psychology. The goal of our approach is to integrate these three

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different points of view into an original perspective called the relational–symbolic model (Cigoli & Scabini, 2006).

The aim of this chapter is threefold: first, we delineate the defining features of the family as a system and as the most important naturally occurring group in society. Thus, we will briefly review the main theories that have tried to delineate the definition of family and from which we have derived our own definition of family. In the second part of the chapter, we analyze the concept of family identity at three different levels: at the level of the family as a group, at the dyadic level of couple relationships, and at the level of individual family members. Finally, we aim to describe family members' identity processes and how they are affected by the family system. We will also focus on the reciprocal influences between the family system and family members' identities.

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## Defining Features of the Family

### Theoretical Roots: Family as a Unit, Group, and System

The family is a highly complex social organism that mirrors and actively interacts with its social and cultural context. It has, therefore, assumed various forms, as documented by both historical research (Laslett & Wall, 1972) and cross-cultural comparisons of families from different cultural backgrounds (Georgas, Berry, van de Vijver, Kagitcibasi, & Poortinga, 2006). As a result of its multifaceted nature, it is difficult to identify what are the “basic characteristics” of the family (i.e., the invariant aspects that operate across different family forms).

During the first few decades of the twentieth century, sociologists first identified the defining features of the family as a unity of interacting personalities (e.g., Burgess, 1926; Cooley, 1909). But it was a psychologist, Kurt Lewin, who, through his new conceptualization of the group, supplied the conceptual categories for making the family a subject of study in the social sciences.

Lewin (1951) defined the group as a “dynamic whole.” The term *whole* means that it is different from the sum of its members, or parts: more specifically, the group, and therefore the family, has definite properties of its own, which differ from the properties of its parts or from the sum of its parts. The term *dynamic* underlines the fact that what is most important is not the similarity of group members, but rather their interdependence with and connectedness to one another.

Field theory, as developed by Lewin, makes it possible to view the relational properties of a group in terms of the relationship between the parts and the whole. The family is a well-organized group with a high degree of unity. Its members play different roles within the whole, that is, the family. Hence, social psychology, especially in its focus on group memberships and intergroup relations (see, e.g., Haslam & Ellemers, Chapter 30, this volume; Spears, Chapter 9, this volume), can inform the study of the family. In fact, for many years, the family was presented as the most significant example of a small natural group (Levine & Moreland, 2006).

After Lewin, interest in groups as real social entities waned in favor of studies of ad hoc artificial groups (e.g., Asch, 1956; Moscovici & Zavalloni, 1969; Tajfel, Billig, Bundy, & Flament, 1971). Consequently, family scholars showed increasing dissatisfaction with the concept of the family as a small group, and started to highlight the differences between the family and other types of groups. The greatest differences were attributed to two elements: *function* and *temporal dimension*. Whereas the function of groups, especially work groups, is their efficiency and productivity, the role of the family is in the development of its members, and in the development of the family as an entity unto itself. With regard to the temporal dimension, it has been observed that most other small social groups generally have a limited lifetime, whereas the family—by definition—has a past, a present, and a future (Klein & White, 1996; Olson, Russell, & Sprenkle, 1983).

The second important perspective which has played a crucial role in family literature, together with field theory, is family systems theory (e.g., Bateson, 1973; Bowen, 1966; Haley, 1976; Minuchin, 1974). Family systems theory has been a reference point for both researchers and family therapists, and has been continually updated and revised over the years. In the beginning, this approach also linked basic family characteristics to concepts of unity, interaction, and relationship (e.g., von Bertalanffy, 1968). In fact, this theory has attempted to balance the idea of (a) family as a whole with its own irreducible features, with (b) the fact that, at the same time, the family exists only when its components interact with each other.

Family components have been conceived in terms of subsystems: for example, the married couple is a subsystem, as is the sibling system. Moreover, each individual is seen as a subsystem in her/his own right, because s/he is a family member with a certain degree of autonomy, but still interdependent with other members and with the functioning of the family system. Within the family, the various subsystems interact, thereby influencing and shaping the family system as a whole. We will see in the next section how being part of these systems, and being part of a specific subsystem, inform one's individual identity.

The concept of systems, analogous to Lewin's field concept, highlights the properties of the whole and represents an important epistemological revolution. This concept has been used in a general sense, concentrating on identifying the basic family patterns of interaction (Beavers & Voeller, 1983; Olson et al., 1983) and focusing mainly on what is happening here and now, but failing to consider family history and the influence of the sociocultural context in which the family is embedded. Only since the 1990s has this issue received major attention, for example, in Bronfenbrenner's (1989) Ecological Systems Theory, McGoldrick and colleagues' family life-cycle model (McGoldrick & Carter, 2003), and the relational-symbolic model by Scabini and Cigoli (2000 and Cigoli & Scabini, 2006).

In sum, both field theory and systems theory have contributed to making the family an

object of study in psychology and sociology, even if these theories have not been able to identify properly the characteristics that make the family a specific system and a specific group, different from other systems and groups with whom it interacts and with its own features and functions.

### The Organizational/Relational Principle

The last few decades have witnessed the emergence of a more complex view of family, and the definition of family has been more clearly delineated. As stated by Klein and White (1996), in order to develop a theory about how families work, one must first define what family is and must identify the distinguishing features of the family. In particular, the relational-symbolic model (Cigoli & Scabini, 2006) delineates the distinctive characteristics both of the family as a system and of its subsystems, taking into account the meanings that different cultures ascribe to these characteristics. To introduce our perspective on family, we will use the concepts of organization and relationship, and then we will provide our specific view of family.

The term "organization," as used by Sroufe and Fleeson (1988), refers to the fact that the family is an organized system with an internal hierarchy that permeates its relationships—and, in particular, its intergenerational relationships—and that interacts purposively with the socio-cultural context. Specifically, the family system organizes *primary relationships*. In the next paragraphs, we explain what we mean by relationship and what we mean by primary.

A family *relationship* binds people together over time, even without their being aware; it refers to what has been established (and continues to be agreed), implicitly or explicitly, with regard to values, meanings, rituals, and the assignment of roles. In this vein, the concept of relationship is on a higher level from that of interaction. As a necessary starting point, we can define *interaction* as the ordinary exchange between family members and examine the communication exchange that occurs between them in the present (here and now) (Haley, 1973; Eisler,

Dare, & Sz mukler, 1988). However, family relationships cannot be reduced to a mere sequence of observable, reciprocal measurable interactions. The relational level comprises meanings that transcend those that emerge from interaction (Hinde, 1997; Szapocznik, Rio, Hervis, Mitrani, Kurtines, & Faraci, 1991).

The distinguishing characteristic of family relationships is that they are *primary*. Following Cooley (1909) we define the family as a primary group because it is “fundamental in forming the social nature and ideals of the individual” (p. 25). Specifically, we argue that family relationships can be understood as primary in two ways:

- a. Family relationships cut across basic divisions of humankind, such as gender and generational differences, and they give rise to future generations that are essential for the survival of society. Following this reasoning, we focus here on nuclear and extended versions of the heterosexual family with biological children, which are the most widespread family forms across countries. We acknowledge that this definition of the family is controversial at the present time and that different types of close relationships do not fit in this definition, but we wish to make our definition clear so that the reader is better able to follow the ideas we present in this chapter. Alternative family forms are examined in other chapters of this volume (e.g., Grotevant & Von Korff, Chapter 24, this volume; Savin-Williams, Chapter 28, this volume).
- b. Family membership imposes strong constraints on individual development. One can escape from a role within the family, but not from family membership. For example, children have no choice about being born into a family and to their parents. Family members may *act* as if they were not bonded to one another, as if they were outside the family group—for example, they can sever their relationships because of conflicts, or decide not to keep in touch with other members of the family—but even when they act as if family relationships are optional, “they do so to the detriment of their own sense of identity” (Walsh, 2003, p. 377).

In sum, building from these concepts of organization and relationship, we define the family as an organization of primary relationships that connects and binds together different genders and different generations to give rise to a new generation. The connection between generations includes both parent–child relationships and relationships between family lineages, both paternal and maternal (i.e., family history). In fact, our perspective outlines the intergenerational side of relationships, which means that we take into consideration the role of different generations in order to understand current patterns of family functioning.

Another particular feature of our perspective is the attention to specific dynamics of exchange between the family and its cultural context. From our perspective, this pattern of exchange is defined not only in terms of person–context reciprocal influence, but also in terms of transmission between generations. We state, in fact, that there is a deep connection between the exchange between generations in a family and the exchange between generations in society. A good example is the transition to adulthood in southern Europe. In this transition the exchange between family generations takes a protective form, reflected in a prolonged cohabitation of young adults with their parents. This pattern compensates for the negative exchange between generations in societies characterized by injustice and unfairness. In fact, over the past decades, the welfare states of these countries have supported the active generation, now adult or elderly, yet they are no longer able to do the same for the younger generation that is about to cross the threshold of adulthood (Cigoli & Scabini, 2006).

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### The Family Identity

Having clarified the definition of family, we shall now illustrate what we mean by family identity. Our definition of identity here is close to Waterman’s (Chapter 16, this volume) concept of “daimon” or true self. Thus, with the term family identity we refer to the family’s true nature,

to the family's potentialities, the realization of which represents the best fulfillment it is capable of. In other words, when we refer to family identity we talk about the patterns of those dimensions that differentiate the family from other important entities and constitute its unique set of potentials and represent its deep nature.

We will address the topic of family identity at three different levels:

1. at the group level, that is, the specific identity of the family as a group;
2. at the couple subsystem level, in fact, each family subsystem, and especially the couple, has its own identity and, thus, its set of potentials to be pursued;
3. at the individual subsystem level, that is, the component of individual identity that comes from being part of a specific family group.

We will explain each of these concepts related to family identity in the following paragraphs.

### **Family Identity as a Group: The Symbolic Dimension and the Caring Principle**

Earlier in this chapter, we clarified our definition of family, focusing our attention on the structural characteristics of the family. However, to speak of family identity, we have to refer not only to the structural features of its bonds but also to the symbolic qualities of these bonds. By symbolic qualities, we refer to those aspects of the family bond that make this bond properly human and that, if respected within a particular family, make the family function well. In fact, depending on whether the family achieves its symbolic potentials, it may produce positive or negative individual outcomes. For example, if family relationships are warm and supportive, family members are likely to display positive psychosocial and health outcomes (e.g., Feaster & Szapocznik, 2002; Passmore, Fogarty, Bourke, & Baker-Evans, 2005). However, chaotic or distant relationships between or among family members are related to distress, substance use, and poor health (Dishion, Capaldi, & Yoerger, 1999; Stouthamer-Loeber, Wei, Homish, & Loeber, 2002).

Research in family psychology underscores the symbolic qualities of the family bond in terms of intimacy (Cordova, Gee, & Warren, 2005; Feeney, Noller, & Ward, 1998; Moss & Schwebel, 1993), emotional support (Burleson & Mortenson, 2003; Cutrona, 1996; Lawrence et al., 2008), satisfaction (Bradbury, Fincham, & Beach, 2000), and empathy (Losoya & Eisenberg, 2001; Soenens, Duriez, Vansteenkiste, & Goossens, 2007). Other aspects that are receiving increased attention are commitment (Bradbury, Karney, Iafate, & Donato, 2010; Iafate, Donato, & Bertoni, 2010), family obligation (Freeberg & Stein, 1996; Fuligni, Alvarez, Bachman, & Ruble, 2005; Stein, 2009), filial responsibility (Dellmann-Jenkins & Brittain, 2003; Kuperminc, Jurkovic, & Casey, 2009), and family values (Barni, 2009; Grusec, Goodnow, & Kuczynski, 2000).

From our perspective, these constructs seem to reflect two different, but not opposing, dimensions of the family bond: the emotional-affective dimension and ethical-legal dimension.<sup>1</sup> When one or both of these dimensions of the family bond is absent, it produces high levels of distress in family members. Hence, the quality of family relationships is determined by the degree of co-presence of those affective and ethical characteristics that converge in what we call the principle of caring: caring for the other person and for the relationship. The emotional-affective side of the bond is rooted in the presence of trust-hope, and the ethical side in justice-loyalty (Jurkovic, 1998).

Erikson (1968, 1982) viewed trust and hope as properties of the developing person that are supported by the family in its fostering of personal growth (Meltzer & Harris, 1983). Within the study of close relationships, trust has become increasingly important in recent decades (Borawski, Ievers-Landis, Lovegreen, & Trapl, 2003; Crocetti, Rubini, & Meuss, 2008; Kerr, Stattin, & Trost, 1999).

The importance of justice and loyalty in family relationships is a key concept in the intergenerational and contextual approach introduced by Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark (1973). These authors see family as a system of credit-debit and obligations that cross generations like

invisible threads making up a family's connective tissue.

In the relational-symbolic model, *both* the affective *and* ethical dimensions of family relationships are considered important; the family bond rests on a foundation of trust and hope, and develops if it respects justice, loyalty, and obligation. Every culture expresses the affective and ethical aspects of the family bond in its own way and may attribute greater value to one rather than another. In many Western cultures, we have shifted from a strong focus on ethical-legal aspects to a point where affective-emotional aspects are considered decidedly more important, and so we find this characteristic in all family relationships (Levine, Sato, Hashimoto, & Verma, 1995). However, both the affective and ethical components are important (e.g., Finley & Schwartz, 2006). In brief, the family fulfills its identity if it can keep its affective and ethical bonds (both of which are essential parts of the caring principle) alive: that is, if it respects its symbolic qualities.

It is worth noting that it may be especially valuable to study family identity at the group level during transition periods (e.g., transition to parenthood, transition to adulthood), which test and reveal the strengths and weaknesses of family bonds. As stated by Cowan and Cowan (2003), the study of transitional periods provides important opportunities for family researchers and clinicians because, on the one hand, they function as "natural experiments" to test hypotheses on family relationships, and, on the other hand, they can be "opportune moments to consider preventive interventions that could be helpful in moving families closer to adaptive positions" (p. 430). The transition periods within a family are also crucial moments for identity redefinition.

### **Family Subsystem Identity: The Couple Identity**

We have focused until now on the identity of the family as a group. Now we consider a specific subsystem identity, namely couple identity. From the point of view of family systems theory, the

couple is a subsystem and so, when a couple is formed, properties of the new couple bond change and are different from the sum of the individual partners' identities. This has been highlighted in Acitelli's and colleagues' work, where it is clear that the marital bond produces a new form of identity (Acitelli, Rogers, & Knee, 1999). From this perspective, couple identity involves the extent to which the relationship itself is seen as an entity (rather than seeing only two individuals). Hence, partners in close relationships incorporate into their self-concepts the connection between the self and the other, i.e., their relationship (Badr, Acitelli, & Carmack Taylor, 2007). Similar to what happens in group identification (Brewer, 2007), individuals engaged in an important (intimate) relationship develop a sense of "we-ness." Note that the couple identity, as an aspect of individual identity, changes with major life transitions and assumes different features at different stages of life (e.g., marriage, childbirth, etc.).

Another consequence of being involved in a couple relationship is that the individual tends to include the other's attributes and the relationship in their mental representation of self. Agnew, Arriaga, and Wilson (2008) maintain that, as one's commitment to a relationship develops, cognitive structures representing the self become restructured. People start to perceive themselves less as individuals and more as part of a pluralistic self-and-partner collective, and they develop a couple-oriented identity. According to the self-expansion model (Aron & Aron, 1986; Aron, Aron, Tudor, & Nelson, 1991), in close relationships a process of inclusion of the other within the self occurs; the self expands to include the other's characteristics such as resources, perspectives, and identities (Aron et al., 2004; cf. Chen, Boucher, & Kraus, Chapter 7, this volume). This mental representation of the self-in-relationship is referred to as *cognitive interdependence*.

However, our perspective adds another aspect to the couple's identity. The couple's new identity is not only a result of the encounter between two personalities, but also an encounter between two family histories. From this point of view, in order to create a true identity, the couple must be able to differentiate itself from the families of

origin; to do so, it must have a certain autonomy in exercising its function and a certain amount of decisional power (e.g., Bowen, 1978; Cowan & Cowan, 2005).

Autonomy and decisional power vary greatly among cultures both within the marital relationship and in the relationship of the couple with the families of origin. For example, in many Islamic cultures, marriages are arranged rather than chosen, and the power balance between the two spouses seems unequal, with the woman being subordinated to her husband (Jen'nan Ghazal, 2004; Zaidi & Shuraydi, 2002). Moreover in these cultures, and in Hindu and Confucian cultures, the marital couple has little autonomy and little decisional power vis-à-vis the families of origin—and this was once true of Western cultures as well. In most contemporary Western cultures, on the other hand, power within a couple is equal (the two spouses have equal rights and obligations), and the couple is seen as autonomous and separate from the families of origin (Georgas et al., 2006). Nonetheless, the family of origin does exercise its influence. In fact, several theoretical approaches have provided insight into how some family-of-origin characteristics may shape the way partners enter their adult romantic relationships, and several models have provided evidence of the effects of family of origin on the offspring's couple relationship (Bryant & Conger, 2002; Busby, Gardner, & Taniguchi, 2005; Mallinckrodt, 2000; Sabatelli & Bartle-Haring, 2003).

Relationships with the family of origin become even more significant when the marital couple becomes a parental couple. In particular, as a parental couple it becomes "a linear bridge" between family generations (Hill, 1970), and carries out the function of mediator between generations (Cigoli & Scabini, 2006). In particular, a couple is mediator between its children and its parents (Brambilla, Manzi, & Regalia, 2010). Such mediation is influenced by the specific contexts in which the couple lives and works. In sum, a couple's identity is fulfilled when the couple has succeeded in building a sense of wellness in connection with previous family history, through a process of personal re-elaboration of

the positive and negative carried over from the family of origin.

### Individual Identity Within the Family

Vignoles, Regalia, Manzi, Golledge, and Scabini (2006) define identity as the subjective concept of oneself as a person. Starting from this definition, we can state that individual identity within the family refers to aspects of self related to (1) belonging to a specific family and (2) the specific identity role played within different family subsystems, e.g., couple relationship, sibling relationship, and parent-child relationship.

With respect to the first concept, family identity at the individual level may be seen as a particular social identity and implies the perception of one's family as an ingroup (Banker & Gaertner, 1998) and the sense of identification with this group (Soliz & Harwood, 2006). The family, in fact, is inherently a shared ingroup for all members and can be considered as "generally the most salient ingroup category in the lives of individuals" (Lay et al., 1998, p. 434). We have to remember that being part of one's family group is very different than many other group memberships. As we have already stated, family membership cannot be psychologically cancelled. This means that individual identity always involves being part of one's family, even if individuals choose to disassociate from it.

The concept of family social identity has been used recently to study the intergroup relationship within the family context. In fact, even if family members share a common family identity, they also possess identities signifying intergroup boundaries within the family (Harwood, Soliz, & Lin, 2006). Such intergroup boundaries may be superseded when family identity (i.e., a common ingroup) is salient (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000). Soliz and Harwood (2006), for example, have studied the intergroup relationship between different generations (youth and elder) within the family context.

Regarding the role identities that individuals play within family subsystems, we should also highlight that family identity is an intricate mix

of many interdependent relationships. So, being a sister, a wife, a mother, and a daughter are not role identities independent of each other. For example, one's identity as a parent may be linked both to one's identity as a partner and also to one's identity as a son/daughter. Thus, parents are also "offspring" of the preceding generation (the grandparents), and their identities are also affected by their own parental and filial relationships, within an intergenerational chain (Cigoli & Scabini, 2006).

Among the different types of relations and roles that a person may serve within his/her life, the most important is the filial relation. Everyone is a son or a daughter, even if they may not become a partner or a parent. The term "filial" involves both the relationship between offspring and each individual parent (mother and father), and the relationship between maternal and paternal lineages. We can assert, therefore, that the "psychic field" of the filial relation is much wider than the dual space created by the relationship between parents and offspring: it is at least a trigenerational system (McGoldrick & Carter, 2003) or, more simply, a multigenerational system (Cigoli & Scabini, 2006). In fact, the family system shows a sort of intergenerational continuity; functional and dysfunctional patterns tend to be repeated across generations, even if not in a deterministic way.

According to Cowan and Cowan (2005), four types of theoretical explanations of intergenerational continuity dominate the current scene. First, some of the repetition of relationship patterns across generations seems to be affected by genetic and other biological mechanisms (Caspi et al., 2002; Plomin, 1994). Second, psychoanalytic formulations propose that both the child's identification with the same-sex parent and the internalization of that parent's superego (i.e., the ethical principles of the parent) provide guidelines for what constitutes appropriate behavior in family relationships (Fraiberg, 1975; Freud, 1922). Third, attachment theory assumes that adults have developed "working models" of parent-child relationships based on experiences with key attachment figures in their families of origin (Bowlby, 1988; Van Ijzendoorn, 1992). These working models lead to the repetition of

secure or insecure patterns of attachment in the next generation. Fourth, social learning theorists (Bandura, 1977; Patterson, 1975) offer an explanation of intergenerational transmission on the basis that children learn patterns of family behavior by observing adults interacting with others and noting which behaviors are reinforced or punished, that they tend to repeat when they form their own families.

Each of these explanations of intergenerational transmission assumes that the parent-child relationship influences individual identity because it determines the individual's access to family heritage (at different levels: genes, unconscious contents, relational schemas, behaviors).

Our specific perspective is that individuals develop a filial identity through a personal internalization of the family heritage, which leads the individual to gain a special and unique place in the family history. If the child does not achieve a personal re-elaboration of the family values and heritage, this may end in two possible negative outcomes. On the one hand, he/she may interrupt the intergenerational transmission by refusing the family heritage a priori; on the other hand, he/she may simply incorporate the parental standards into his/her self-system without any personal re-elaboration.

Zentner and Renaud (2007) outlined that the task of building identity within the family involves three main component processes: family transposition (what the parents want to transmit to their children), filial accurate perception (the extent to which the child receives the message that the parent intended to transmit), and individual re-elaboration (the extent to which the child reconsiders the patterns from her/his family of origin). In the next section, we will see that, from our perspective, the re-elaboration process is not reducible to cognitive elaboration, but deals with the affective and ethic symbolic dimensions of the family.

### **Building Couple Identity Within the Family Context**

We have now discussed the defining features of the family and the meaning of family identity

at the family group level and at the family subsystem level (both dyads and individuals). We have seen that both dyad and individual identities emerge, at least in part, from being members of a family and that this implies a process of internalization of family heritage. But not only is the family identity developed within the family context; we could say, in fact, that the whole subsystem identity, for example the couple identity, is developed mainly within the family context. In other words, the family context influences the development of not just one's personal identity as a family member, but also other aspects of personal identity, such as, for example, one's professional identity. Family is not a neutral environment in which identity development takes place. In contrast, it deeply affects the individual process, starting during adolescence, that leads to the development of one's identity (Grotevant & Cooper, 1986).

Scholars interested in the topic of how identity develops within the family context have focused their attention mainly on the individuation process—whereby young people begin to explore (or discover) who they might become. The classic theories of Blos (1967) and Kroger (1985), rooted in psychoanalytic theory, define the individuation process in terms of separation—stating that adolescents must separate from their parents in order to develop an identity. These theories assume that the adolescent must adopt a “rebellious” position in order to individuate. Other authors stress instead the stable connection between adolescents and their parents as providing the optimal context for individuation (see Grotevant & Cooper, 1986; Youniss & Smollar, 1985). Recently, Meeus, Iedema, Maassen, and Engels (2005) empirically supported this second perspective. In this vein, the individuation process has been redefined as a task of gaining autonomy while maintaining relatedness to parents (Kruse & Walper, 2008).

In the family literature, the process of individuation has been viewed from a systemic perspective. According to this approach, we should distinguish the individuation process from the differentiation process. The former is located at the individual level, whereas the latter is located

at the family system level and regulates distance between family members (i.e., the degree the family system allows the individuation process of its members) (Sabatelli & Mazor, 1985).

Many authors agree that, to understand identity development within the family context, the individuation process and the differentiation process have to be considered together, as a systemic co-construction process (e.g., Buhl, 2008). In order to understand how individual family members define their identities within the family context, we must keep in mind the interdependence that characterizes the family. Thus, not only individuals, but the whole family system is involved in the process of identity subsystem definition. This is why, in the symbolic-relational perspective, we more appropriately use the term mutual differentiation. In the next section, we will analyze what we mean by this process.

### The Mutual Differentiation Process

Mutual differentiation is the dialectic process of individuals and families freeing themselves from each other, *but* still remaining emotionally related. It is a relational process that deals with the ethical and affective symbolic properties of the family system. We use the term *mutual* because, as family subsystems and the overall family system grow together, the process of the family subsystem's identity development involves both the family system and the family subsystems, and their relations. Thus, it is not just the individual or the family dyads that have to individuate from the family, but the family must also permit and encourage this process (see also Stierlin, 1974). We also use the term *differentiation* because, for the family and its subsystems to function adequately, they should satisfy the basic human needs of relatedness, autonomy, and distinctiveness. These needs have been conceptualized in many theories to be related to the definition of adult identity.

The *relatedness need* refers to the “desire to feel connected with others” (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and the need to maintain or enhance feelings of closeness to, or acceptance by, other

people, whether in dyadic relationships or within ingroups (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). This need has been identified as a fundamental human motivation (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 2000). The relatedness motive has been included in several theories of identity motivation (Brewer, 1991; Leary & Baumeister, 2000; Snyder & Fromkin, 1980). Bauer and McAdams (2000) propose that the need for relatedness, together with autonomy and competence needs, point individuals toward an well-defined identity structure.

Within the family, the need to belong is satisfied by the presence of strong family bonds, which include feelings and behaviors such as emotional closeness, support, nurturance, and so on. This is the dimension that we call *family cohesion*, the sense of closeness, intimacy and belonging shared within the family, which represents the expression of the emotional–affective pole of family relations. Low levels of family cohesion are labeled *family disengagement* (e.g., Anderson & Sabatelli, 1992; Olson, 1982).

The autonomy need has been defined within self-determination theory by its primary etymological meaning of self-governance, or rule by the self (e.g., Ryan & Deci, 2006). Autonomy is considered a basic psychological need (along with relatedness and competence), and its effects on individual functioning have been shown to be pervasive (Ryan & Deci, 2006). In relation to identity development, it has been shown that those who are autonomy-oriented organize their behavioral regulation by taking elective interest in possibilities and choices (see Soenens & Vansteenkiste, Chapter 17, this volume).

Finally, the *distinctiveness need* pushes toward the establishment and maintenance of a sense of differentiation from others (Vignoles, Chrysochoou, & Breakwell, 2000) and of uniqueness (Snyder & Fromkin, 1980). Vignoles et al. (2000) define this need as the *motive* that pushes toward the establishment and maintenance of a sense of differentiation from others. The distinctiveness dimension deals with the basic human need of developing a unique identity. Culture may determine (in part) the sources from which the distinctiveness need may be fulfilled, but some form of distinctiveness

is logically necessary in order to develop a meaningful sense of self (Codol, 1981), and hence the motive is theorized to be universal (see Vignoles, Chapter 18, this volume).

In the family literature, qualities of the family system that satisfy or threaten both the basic human needs of distinctiveness and autonomy fall under a common umbrella (multidimensional) construct, called *family enmeshment*. Family enmeshment is defined as a particular *characteristic* of the family bond, reflecting the extent to which family members' interpersonal boundaries are violated or respected in the family context. In particular, Scabini (1985) has emphasized the importance of considering interpersonal boundaries within the family. This kind of boundary reflects the amount of respect for the psychological individuality of each person in the family: when an individual's boundaries are not respected, his or her ability to feel, develop opinions, and make decisions within the family is negatively impacted. Family enmeshment is related to the ethical pole of family relations because it is strongly linked with the absence of a sense of justice, recognition, and respect for individual identity (see Barber et al., 2008).

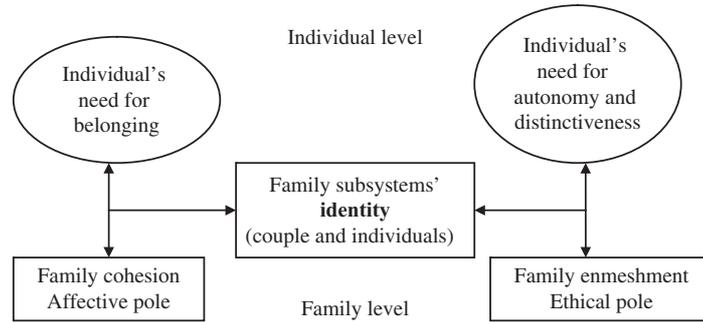
Figure 23.1 shows the relational–symbolic perspective on the mutual differentiation process.

### Cohesion and Enmeshment in the Family Literature

There is substantial disagreement among family scholars about the nature of the relationship between the two domains of family cohesion and family enmeshment. Or, in other words, whether these constructs form a single dimension (where family enmeshment represents extremely high levels of cohesion) or two separate ones (low versus high family cohesion, and low versus high family enmeshment).

In Olson's circumplex model, family cohesion and family enmeshment are seen as aspects of a single dimension, assuming that a high level of cohesion constitutes a lack of family differentiation or, in other words, family enmeshment

**Fig. 23.1** Mutual differentiation process: identity is the outcome of the relationship between individual and family system on the dimensions of belonging and distinctiveness



(e.g., Minuchin, 1974; Olson, 1982). These theorists propose a curvilinear relationship between cohesion and optimal family functioning: intermediate levels of cohesion are considered most adaptive, whereas both high and low extremes (often referred to as enmeshment and disengagement, respectively) are thought to be maladaptive. On the other hand, many scholars have argued that the one-dimensional model leads to an unclear and partial view of individual and family processes, and that the optimal situation is where a combination of *both* closeness *and* respect for autonomy and distinctiveness is achieved for individuals and for families (e.g., Green & Werner, 1996).

Thus, the one-dimensional model, with family enmeshment at one end and family cohesion at the other, has been criticized in the family literature. Starting from previous theories of the family system and the concepts of boundaries and enmeshment, Green and Werner (1996) criticized the assumption that enmeshment (lack of self–other differentiation) and disengagement (which is supposed to involve too much self–other differentiation, that is, too much individuation) represent opposing ends of the same continuum. Their theoretical model views the cohesion–enmeshment domain of family functioning as entailing not a single dimension but rather two independent orthogonal dimensions: intrusiveness (blurring or violation of boundaries) and closeness–caregiving (relationship-enhancing behaviors such as warmth and nurturance). Thus, from this perspective, higher levels of relatedness and low levels of intrusiveness are adaptive in the family

context—but a family can be highly cohesive *and* can promote individual autonomy.

Empirical studies have tended to refute the one-dimensional model (e.g., Barber & Buehler, 1996; Manzi, Vignoles, Regalia, & Scabini, 2006). Hence, authors have begun to disentangle concepts of cohesion (at individual or family level) and enmeshment (at individual or family level), both theoretically and empirically (e.g., Gavazzi, 1993; Green & Werner, 1996). Recently, some authors have stated that a better comprehension of the relationship between these two dimensions of the family functioning may be gained through a better understanding of the multidimensionality of the construct of family enmeshment. In fact, this construct is an umbrella term for a variety of parenting practices and family processes. Some of these aspects may be in opposition with family cohesion, others may not be. In the following section we address this issue and present two studies in which different dimensions of family enmeshment have been analyzed empirically. One of these studies has also addressed how culture impacts these different dimensions.

In fact, there is a substantial agreement in the literature that culture affects the meaning and the relationship between these poles (Kagitçibasi, 2005; Trommsdorff, 2005). As we have seen, however, there is still confusion about the definition of these dimensions and about the way to interpret the impact of culture on them. What is the human experience of relatedness? What is the human experience of differentiating? Are these universal human experiences, or not? The answers to these questions are very important

in understanding the process of building identity within the family.

### The Multidimensional Model of Family Enmeshment

Few studies have tested empirically the multidimensionality of family enmeshment. Soenens, Vansteenkiste, et al. (2007) provide evidence for the distinction between the dimension of promotion of volitional functioning and promotion of independence in a sample of Belgian students. *Promotion of volitional functioning* within the family context (Grolnick, Ryan, & Deci, 1991) as opposed to conditional regard (e.g., Assor, Roth, & Deci, 2004) refers to the degree to which parents allow their children to make *autonomous decisions* about their lives or, the opposite, the degree to which they are manipulative and intrusive. This dimension of parenting is related to the individual need for autonomy (as theorized in self-determination theory: see Soenens & Vansteenkiste, Chapter 17, this volume), and interferes with the individual's decision-making process. An example item to measure this construct is: "My mother/father allows me to decide things for myself" or "My mother/father insists upon doing things her/his way (reverse coded)."

The construct of *promotion of independence* in the family context, as conceptualized by Silk, Morris, Kanaya, and Steinberg (2003), involves the degree to which families promote distinctiveness, or, the opposite, intrude on the cognitive sphere of its members by imposing contents, values, and worldviews. The promotion of the *independence* dimension may be related to the individual's cognitive boundaries, that is, whether and how others interfere with individual self-representation. An example item to measure this construct is: "My mother/father emphasizes that it is important to get my ideas across even if others don't like it" or "My mother/father pushes me to think independently." In their study, Soenens and colleagues found that perceived promotion of volitional functioning uniquely predicted adjustment, whereas perceived promotion of independence did not. Volitional

functioning therefore represents autonomous and self-directed thinking, whereas independence does not necessarily do the same.

Starting from these findings, Manzi, Regalia, Soenens, Fincham, and Scabini (2011) conducted a cross-cultural study to disentangle four different dimensions of family enmeshment taken from different authors in the literature: promotion of volitional functioning, promotion of independence, family separation, and psychological control. They also explored how culture affected the relationship between these dimensions, and between these dimensions and individual well-being.

The first two dimensions—promotion of independence and promotion of volitional functioning—were the same as in Soenens and colleagues' (2007) study. The construct of *family separation* was taken from Bloom (1985) and measures the degree to which the family promotes physical separation between its members: in other words, the degree to which the family allows individual members to pass time on their own and to organize their time independently. The *separation* dimension deals with individual *physical and temporal boundaries*, that is, if and how others interfere in the individual organization of personal time and space. Its opposite is proximity. An example item to measure this construct is: "Family members find it hard to get away from each other."

Finally, *family psychological control* (Barber, 1996) deals with the family's respect for the worth of each individual family member. In this case, the sense of identity is deeply affected, and the individual develops a negative sense of self.<sup>2</sup> Individuals with a negative sense of the self are not able to perceive their own self as positive and distinct from important others, and they are also characterized by high levels of emotional interactivity with important others (Green & Werner, 1996). An example item to measure this construct is: "My mother/father brings up past mistakes when she/he criticizes me."<sup>3</sup>

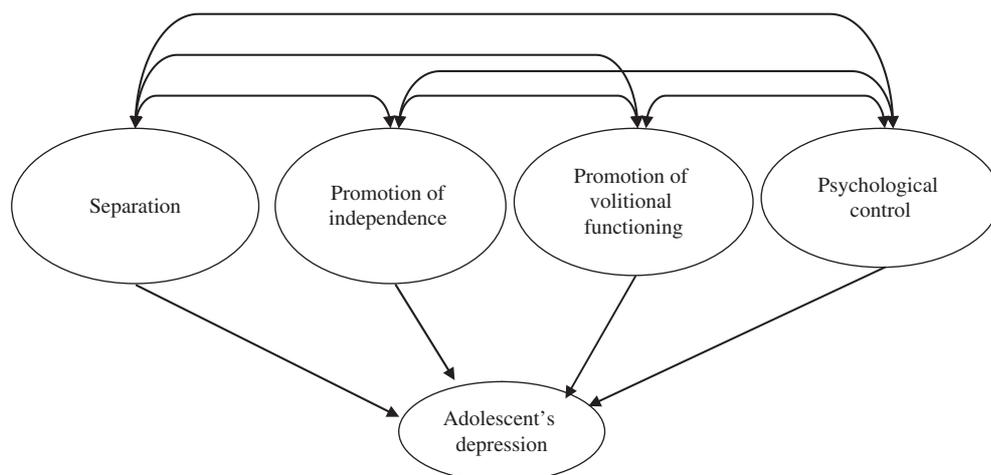
The study was conducted in four different countries: Italy and Belgium, two Western European countries with differing family cultures; as well as the United States and China.

Participants were first-year university students. Results suggest an interesting pattern. In all four countries, participants' perceptions clearly differentiated among the four constructs of promotion of volitional functioning, promotion of independence, separation and psychological control within the family context, providing empirical evidence for the theoretical disentanglement of these dimensions of family differentiation. As expected, results also indicated that culture moderated the relationships among these dimensions. To better understand these patterns, Manzi and colleagues also explored how these four dimensions were related to depression (see Fig. 23.2).

Manzi et al. found that parental psychological control was the most important and positive predictor of individual depression in all four countries. In fact, this dimension was the only direct predictor of depression in all four countries. Moreover, in all four countries, there was a significant indirect effect of promotion of volitional functioning, through family psychological control, on depression. For Belgian, American, and Italian participants, promotion of independence also had a significant indirect effect on depression, again mediated by psychological control, but this was not the case in the Chinese sample. Finally, only for the Belgian and North American samples did family separation have

a negative indirect impact on depression. For Chinese participants, family separation was unrelated to depression, whereas for Italians, family separation was indirectly but positively related to depression.

In summary, this study suggests that we can meaningfully disentangle four dimensions of family enmeshment: family separation, family promotion of independence, family promotion of volitional functioning, and family psychological control. Moreover, culture may impact the ways in which these dimensions are interpreted and interrelated across cultures. In particular, family psychological control (negatively) and family promotion of volitional functioning (positively) seem to be "universally" valued and equally important for the individual and for his/her well-being. Family promotion of independence seems to be important for individuals in Western countries but not in the Chinese context. This result is consistent with the assumption that Eastern societies promote a less independent self-construal (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Finally, family separation seems to be valued as an indicator of family distinctiveness only in Belgium and the United States—the two most individualistic countries in the sample. For Chinese and Italians, however, separation from the family may not be perceived as a positive indicator of family functioning. On the contrary, especially



**Fig. 23.2** Model tested by Manzi et al. (2011)

in Italian culture, it could be perceived as problematic.

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### **Building Identity in the Family Context: Individuation and Differentiation Processes**

Before concluding this final section on how family may affect identity development, we would like to direct attention to an insufficiently studied field of research: how the couple subsystem defines its identity in the context of the partners' families of origin. Earlier, we noted that the new couple has to develop its own identity within the family context. The mutual differentiation process is typically linked to the individual identity development during adolescence, but it could also easily be applied to the couple subsystem. Cigoli and Scabini (2006) argue that couple functioning, similar to individual functioning, involves an individuation process. As the adolescent develops his/her identity within the family, building clear individual boundaries, the same happens for the couple, which must differentiate itself from each partner's family of origin and must build clear and well-defined identity boundaries.

Until now, little effort has been made to explore empirically the process of couple identity formation and how the family of origin may affect this process. An exception is a recent study by Manzi, Parise, Iafrate, and Vignoles (2010). In this study, it was proposed that family enmeshment may affect the process of partners including each other into their sense of self. The longitudinal study, conducted in a sample of more than 350 couples, showed interesting results. First, for both women and men, higher levels of enmeshment with the family of origin were predictive of lower levels of "inclusion of the partner into the self" (after Aron & Aron, 1986). That is, coming from a family with high levels of enmeshment may pose a barrier to a couple's functioning and, in particular, to the development of a couple identity. A second interesting result was that each partner's level of family enmeshment was predictive of both partners' couple satisfaction. In other words, high levels of family enmeshment

for the male partner also predicted lower couple satisfaction in the female partner, and vice versa.

Results of this study clearly show that, similar to what occurs for individual identity, family of origin may affect the couple's identity development. Moreover, it outlines not only the importance of intergenerational relations, but also the strong interdependence between the two lineages when a new couple is created (Sabatelli & Bartle-Haring, 2003).

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### **Conclusions**

In this chapter, we have addressed the topic of identity and family processes. Our starting point was to show that family is a particular group and that it has a specific identity as a group. We referred to the relational-symbolic model developed by Cigoli and Scabini (2006) to delineate the defining features of the family and the concept of family identity at the individual, couple, and group levels. We have also stressed how the identities of family subsystems (individuals and dyads) are built within the family through the mutual differentiation process. In this process, both the family system and the family subsystem interconnect to satisfy the basic human needs to belong, to be autonomous, and to be distinct, which are all essential for identity development (cf. Adams & Marshall, 1996).

At the intervention level, we could say that what we have so far seen theoretically is also relevant for systemic-relational clinical practice. The goal of this kind of intervention is to help the family and family subsystems build clear and defined boundaries in order to provide a clear sense of identity among family members (Bowen, 1978). Such intervention programs are usually preventive in nature and are especially useful in dealing with family transitions (see Cowan & Cowan, 2005). Most of these training programs have been developed to help families increase their relational skills linked to couple and parent-child bonds such as conflict management, communication, and intimacy (see Bodenmann & Shantinah, 2004; Olson & Olson, 1999; Patterson & Forgatch, 1987;

Webster-Stratton, 1981). These programs may indirectly promote a better-defined sense of identity within the family. Only a few efforts, however, have been devoted to the redefinition of identity after the most important family life-cycle transitions. A good example in such an intervention is the “Becoming a Family Project” developed by Cowan and Cowan (1992), which represents the first training program for the transition to parenthood. The title itself directs particular attention to the link between family processes and the psychological birth of a new family member. In this project, aspects of identity are treated as emerging issues in order to understand and manage the transition to parenthood (see also Manzi, Vignoles, & Regalia, 2010, regarding the study of identity change after family transition).

In conclusion, we would like to stress once more the importance of the ways in which culture affects the relationship between family dynamics and identity development. We believe that, within the family context, it is meaningful to search for universal characteristics but that culture affects how these are displayed and how they develop. This is particularly important for those who want to research or promote family processes and identity development in a multicultural society and for those who are looking for tools to guide and intervene.

showed that people with negative self-views embrace negative rather than positive partners, this for the desire of self-stability. However, the theory leaves unclear why a person may develop a negative rather than a positive self-view in the first place. Here, we suggest that a negative sense of self can result from negative family patterns and, in particular, an intrusive and controlling relationship with parents.

3. In the family psychology literature, there is an ongoing debate on how the construct of psychological control is related to the construct of promotion of volitional functioning. Recently, Soenens, Vansteenkiste, and Sierens (2009) proposed to consider promotion of volitional functioning as the opposite end of psychological control—in other words, they stated that parents promoting autonomy necessarily do not enact controlling and manipulative behaviors. Here, following Barber’s conceptualization of the psychological control construct (Barber, 2002; Barber et al., 2008), we consider promotion of volitional functioning and psychological control as two different, even if related constructs. They are related because both pertain to the dimension of family differentiation. They are different because psychological control affects the child’s sense of self, whereas promotion of volitional functioning is related to the child’s capacity to make autonomous choices.

## Notes

1. Other scholars have proposed similar, but not identical, categorizations of family-relational components (see, for example, Finley & Schwartz, 2004).
2. Note that within social psychology literature on identity, self-verification theory (Swann, Chang-Schneider, & Angulo, 2007) has focused its attention on the positive and negative sense of self. Specifically in the famous Mr. Nice and Mr. Nasty study, positive and negative sense of self were studied in relation to close relationships. The study

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