

DIFFERENTIATION AND MENTAL RESILIENCE FROM ANCIENT GREECE AND ITS INSTITUTIONS TO THE PRESENT DAY

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We will try to connect the concepts of differentiation and mental resilience that promote health with the broader socio-economic context in which they are developed.

The demands on modern man to remain functional are increased, while at the same time the broader context is becoming increasingly complex, unpredictable, uncontrolled, and ends up being entropic. The trends of the era, with the dominance of social media and the under-functioning of natural supersystems/collectivities, lead man to the need to create imaginary supersystems (social networks) that do not correspond to real relationships. Critical thinking is limited and spontaneous reactions (like, share) are reinforced, especially in younger generations!

In this effort, we will also be inspired by Aristophanes, who refers to a different socio-political context, that of the Athenian democracy of the 5th century BC, in which context, the **demos** (which means the people) participated directly in political decisions, functioning as a collectivity, as Aristotle describes it in detail in his work *"The Athenian Constitution"*. In contrast, today, the people are represented by delegates who usually change their agenda after they are elected, not fulfilling their original promises.

We live in an era where information has reached incredible proportions, where we can learn everything that is happening on the other side of the world. This information overload, however, increases anxiety (Chrousos, 2024). Stress experts talk about postmodern stress from information overload. This postmodern stress, which is psycho-socio-economic, creates the chronic stress/inflammation syndrome, through stress hormones and inflammation.

At the same time, we can obtain a position and an opinion on many issues that are happening around us. **However, this differentiation is not completed;** it does not lead anywhere because we do not make decisions, not even for our local region. This creates feelings of weakness and irresponsibility. At the same time, action is absent more than ever, and the gap between position and action grows ever wider.

We hear about the murders in Gaza, the wars, we are a breath away from a nuclear war, our souls are bleeding, but beyond signing a petition or participating in a march, we have no ability to act and intervene in events that directly or indirectly concern us.

What impact does this position-action difference have on our mental resilience?

First, let us take a brief retrospective look at this, and then make reference to mental resilience, and finally to differentiation.

Mental resilience is the ability to bounce back, endure hardship, and repair oneself (Wolin & Wolin, 1993). It is not a permanent characteristic of humans, but it is a psychological and physical ability to recover, which can change depending on environmental conditions. As a concept, Mental Resilience was first described for children and then for adults.

Resilience factors: individual (endogenous). Family and social (exogenous), existence of a social network, belonging to a group.

Endogenous factors are those that have to do with the individual itself and act as a protector for them. Such capabilities are acceptance and optimistic thinking, high self-esteem and self-sufficiency, a sense of control, adaptability and others. Exogenous factors are the ones linked to the environment in which the individual develops and acts, such as family, school, the community, work, neighborhood, the wider environment, which, when functional and supportive mitigate the risk factors and help the person take active action in their life by overcoming a difficult situation. Mental resilience is directly linked to stress, and specifically, with its effective management. Bonnie Benard (1995) states that all people have inner developmental wisdom, and every person has an innate capacity for resilience, as long as the conditions are there to build it.

At a higher level, there is also social resilience, which is the ability of a community or system to cope with stressful situations or disturbances, maintaining cohesion, social functioning and well-being. It concerns the ability to recover, adapt and grow after a disturbance, whether this is a natural disaster or a social or economic crisis.

Differentiation is the active, ongoing process of defining oneself, revealing oneself, clarifying boundaries, and managing the anxiety that arises from the risk of either greater intimacy or possible detachment. To look within oneself and clarify what one thinks, feels, and wants/desires. It is the ability to be oneself, in interaction and interrelation with others. It is more of a constant striving for balance, rather than a goal that can ever be 100% achieved. This concept was developed by Bowen.

Murray Bowen, who primarily dealt with family systems, expanded his ideas to understand broader social systems and dynamics. He observed parallels between family and social emotional processes, suggesting that societies, like families, experience periods of regression and progress due to factors such as stress and emotional interdependence. Specifically, he developed eight themes, of which the 8th refers to social processes, which is what we will focus on (social emotional process).

Bowen applied the concept of differentiation of the self to social contexts. Individuals with higher levels of self-differentiation are better equipped to manage social pressures and maintain their own perspectives, while those with lower levels may be more vulnerable.

He recognised that societies, like families, can also move toward greater maturity and responsibility, particularly when individuals or groups can act on principle and lead with thoughtful action, rather than being guided by emotional reactivity.

Bowen's work highlights the importance of understanding how emotional patterns, transmitted from generation to generation, can influence not only family dynamics but also broader social structures and behaviours, from political discourse to social movements.

Similarly, in group therapy, differentiation refers to a member's ability to maintain a sense of self while interacting with others, balancing individuality with group connection. It is the ability to think and feel independently, even when facing pressure from the group or leader, and to express one's own needs while

participating in the group without feeling pressured to conform to the group's ideas or expectations.

Well-differentiated members can set clear boundaries and express their needs, while still participating in the group process.

Differentiation can affect how conflicts are handled, how decisions are made, and how members support each other.

We will attempt a temporal leap from today to yesterday, comparing differentiation in connection to the political institutions-supersystems of nowadays and those of the Athenian Democracy of the 5th century BC, as described in ancient Greek literature (philosophy and poetry).

The concept of health in its holistic sense was also connected to the health of the city as an institution in ancient Greece.

We will refer to Aristophanes and his comedy "*Acharnians*," which was written and performed at the Lenaia theatrical competition in 425 BC and won 1st place. The year in which The *Acharnians* (the oldest surviving comedy) is played, the Peloponnesian War, which started in 431 BC (and ended in 404 BC), is still raging, with no hope of peace in sight. All these years, the Athenians of the countryside, such as the Acharnians, from the largest municipality of Attica, have abandoned their homes and live within the walls, where there is no shortage of problems, while the countryside of Attica has been surrendered to the mercy of the Peloponnesian-Spartans, who invade Attica almost every year and destroy everything.

The play takes place within this context.

Dikaiopolis is the protagonist of this play. He is a peasant who was forced to leave his fields and settle in the city of Athens, within the Long Walls. His name is not accidental but conceptual. It is composed of two words: Dikaio (Justice) and Polis (City), that is, the one who coordinates with the institutions of the city (polis), who represents the justice of the city.

He reminisces about his rural life, feeling nostalgic. He is frustrated with his warlike fellow citizens and decides to sign a peace treaty with the Lacedaemonians on his own. How will he achieve this? The City, with the institution of the Athenian Assembly, which functions as a supersystem, allows him to argue in favour of peace, risking his life, against his fellow citizens who wish for the continuation of the war. His fellow Acharnian citizens, who have suffered the horrors of war but want it to continue to take revenge, react violently to his action. Following his speech, the chorus is initially divided between the proposal

of the peace-loving Dikaiopolis and the war-loving general Lamachus, but ultimately sides with Dikaiopolis. The end of the play is built on the contrast between the pleasures of Dikaiopolis and the sufferings of the warlike Lamachus. Ultimately, Dikaiopolis achieves his goal. Thus, he can finally celebrate the Dionysia in the fields with his family again and enjoy the things that the war had deprived him of. Dikaiopolis achieves his desire with his political freedom. He is the active differentiated citizen who can have his life, thinking and action in harmony.

Stage director G. Kakleas, who staged the play in Epidaurus 10 years ago, says:

“Aristophanes' hero goes against the system of that era. Dikaiopolis was labeled a traitor by the warmongers of the Athenian Democracy. Even though the Athenian Democracy was not yet losing the war, he said: ‘What are we doing in this phase of victory? Are we headed for a cliff? This civil war that has begun will destroy us.’ Aristophanes was a brave writer. Imagine what he faced in making this point in the first six years of the Peloponnesian War. His hero, Dikaiopolis, proposes a model of individual peace – then, of course, he invites people into it – in order to shake up the whole system. He is a revolutionary. He is not a leader, but a simple man and that is what is most interesting. He does not wield power, he simply wants to live, and that is even more profound. Dikaiopolis wants the celebrations of Dionysus, he wants the joy of life, he wants to fall in love, in other words he has an Epicurean attitude towards life. You automatically relate to him, with the simplicity of his thinking and his desire for life. When we say we want peace, we are essentially looking for an affirmation in life. War is a concept of aggression and destruction”.

Therefore, according to Bowen's theory, who saw man as a being in evolution and differentiation, we would say that Dikaiopolis is a highly differentiated man, which is, however, something that is facilitated by the socio-political context in which he lives.

He lives in a democratic city, Athens, in which citizens meet in the Assembly and make decisions on all matters that concern them. The Assembly was a political institution in ancient Greece that facilitated the differentiation of individuals, the assumption of responsibility for the opinion they expressed, and therefore, their sense of control over their lives, something that, as we know, helps with mental resilience.

We will make a brief reference to ancient Greek thinkers to parallel the concept of psychosocial health with the health of the city as an institution.

Even as far back as the 6th century BC, the ancient Greeks understood the importance of respecting institutions-laws. “It is necessary for the people to fight for the law as for its wall”, said Heraclitus.

Alcmaeon of Croton (6th to 5th century BC), a student of Pythagoras and physician/philosopher, describes the decaying destruction of harmony and the cause of disease in terms of politics. Health is nothing more than isonomy, i.e. a form of natural justice that must necessarily govern the relations of the opposing forces of the body. In contrast, disease is a form of political excess, the tyrannical and violent dominance of a monarchical element. Health is democratic equality, whereby disease is a corrupting monarchy. Similarly, the earlier Hesiod (700 BC), believed that the health of the inhabitants, fertility, and wealth are the result of equity: the respect for justice within the city. If exaggeration or violation of justice (hubris) prevails, if the monarch proves unjust, we have plague, teratogenesis, famine and destruction. The mythological thought of Hesiod and the physiological interpretation of the Pythagoreans/Alcmaeon start from the same basis: the disturbance of the existing order of harmony or the natural climate (Hippocrates) has effects on the human body.

Solon, an important Athenian legislator, philosopher, poet and one of the seven sages of ancient Greece (639-559 BC), gives the image of the city that can be damaged as a result of the unjust actions of its citizens. Therefore, the terms of health or disease are intertwined and correlated with political terms. In the poem *Eunomia* he mentions the sick social organism, the infected community and the necessary medicine for the treatment of socio-political diseases. He also gave a warning: “And so the public evil comes home to each man and the courtyard gates no longer have the will to hold it back, but it leaps over the high barrier and assuredly finds him out, even if he takes refuge in an innermost corner of his room”. Today with globalization this is truer than ever.

Aristotle (383-322 BC) in his book *The Athenian Constitution*, refers to Peisistratus, saying that he told the Athenians when he became tyrant to return to their private affairs, and that he would take care of all public matters himself, thus establishing tyranny. He gave money to farmers (we call it subsidies today) so that they would go to the countryside and not have time to deal with public affairs, but instead remain engrossed in their private affairs. Abstention from participation in public affairs was called “*idioteia*” (idiocy) in ancient Greece, and it was a despicable behavior.

It is easier to corrupt a few than many, which is why decisions are best made by the Assembly, says Aristotle.

Once a month, the municipal assembly met to judge the rulers based on whether they were doing their job well or not.

The penalty for abuse and bribery by public figures was a ten-fold return of the money. The offense is much more serious if it involves public money.

Thus, the city-state is also prior in nature to the household and to each of us individually. For the whole must necessarily be prior to the part; since when the whole body is destroyed, foot or hand will not exist except in an equivocal sense, like the sense in which one speaks of a hand sculptured in stone as a hand [...]. It is clear therefore that the state is also prior by nature to the individual [...]. From these things therefore it is clear that the city-state is a natural growth, and that man is by nature a political animal [...] while it [the city-state] comes into existence for the sake of life, it exists for the good life (Aristotle, *Politics* 1252a2-3).

The sophists, Plato, Aristotle, and other ancient Greek philosophers generally considered that the dominant function of politics was to form the framework and conditions, so that the members of the city, the citizens as individuals and as a whole, could achieve true mental balance and bliss. The achievement of knowledge and true happiness becomes the essence of science of the good, that is ethics. The goal, therefore, is the happiness of individual citizens, within the framework of the conquest of the collective wellbeing of all citizens, but also the formation of the normality of the political-social life of the city. In contrast, today the goal is simply prosperity, mainly financial.

We will close with the more contemporary George Vassiliou (Athenian Institute of Anthropolos), who, using other terms, states that the psychosocial system of an individual cannot become differentiated as a system, except by remaining an integral member of a group, thus rendering it his Supersystem. This is because differentiation in

- a. psychosocial processes, such as cognitive and emotional
- b. the types of behavior and relationships with others

cannot, of course, be done in a vacuum. It is equally self-evident that a number of people, by remaining members of the group in interdependence, interrelation, and interaction, giving the group the properties of a System, make it their supersystem. And by being in an evolving differentiation, they also impart to their Supersystem an evolving organised complexity and differentiation.

If a person then also a member of a group, and vice versa, "if a member of a group, then a person", as G.Vassiliou often said.

The opposite is true today. Political supersystems (institutions) either do not exist, or they operate exploitatively, with clientelism and entropically. Today's citizens remain outside the political system, they cannot make the slightest decision even concerning their neighborhood (at least in our country). The gap is enormous.

Basically, what we want to highlight is the lack of control of the modern lifestyle, which results in low mental resilience and, therefore, poor health. There are no institutions (such as the Athenian Assembly, in ancient Greece) within which the individual can express his opinion and decide collectively. In short, society is outside the political system that makes decisions. Personal responsibility is not cultivated, and differentiation does not have a social context in which to develop, so as to lead to better biopsychosocial health of the individual and society in general.

The question that arises is whether today's economic-socio-political realities constitute a framework within which it is possible for individuals and society to become differentiated, aiming for greater psychosocial resilience, and how this can be improved through institutional changes. As family therapists, we work with the differentiation of family members, but we see every day how political-socio-economic factors invade therapy and burden it. This is an old question... The systemic perspective helps us understand the dynamics of the various levels that operate in parallel with the micro-system of the family that we have before us. Perhaps, just as therapists following the second and third order Cybernetics gave up their authority and gave space to the family, politicians should also give up their own authority and let citizens undertake the decision-making.

C. Castoriades notes that nine out of ten political decisions of the ancient Athenian assembly were correct. Yet this needs continuous training and involvement in dialectic and synthesis of the opposite opinions. G. Kontogiorgis postulates that the existence of the internet makes this option more feasible than ever before.

We hope that the subject of this presentation has shed a little more light on this dynamic. Ancient Greek institutions have given us an inspiration model.

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