

Differentiation of Self and Its Relationship With Family Functioning in South Koreans

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This study examined relationships between differentiation of self and family functioning within the South Korean culture. The participants in this study were 235 Koreans residing in South Korea and ranged in age from 20 to 70 years. An analysis of variance revealed that older South Koreans had higher differentiation levels than younger South Koreans. Results of a multivariate analysis of covariance revealed there were significant differences between the high differentiation group and the low differentiation group across family functioning, family satisfaction, and family communication. The authors briefly discuss implications for clinical practice and future research.

South Korea is one of many countries where the profession of Marriage and Family Therapy (MFT) is continuously growing. Not only can students learn MFT in South Korean universities, but interesting research based on MFT theories has been carried out with individuals, couples, and families in South Korea (Sim & Kim, 2000). Among various MFT theories, *Bowen Family Systems Theory* (BFST; Bowen, 1978) is especially well-known and frequently used by therapists and researchers who work with South Korean families (Jung & Sim, 2007). Part of the reason for the special interest in BFST can be because this therapy model emphasizes family-of-origin issues

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and intergenerational interactions, which are greatly valued by South Korean families.

Bowen (1978) explained that differentiation of self, often referred to simply as differentiation, was an important process in which an individual comes to think, feel, and act for her or himself as an emotionally distinct human being. Bowen purported that individuals with higher levels of differentiation had healthier family functioning. He believed that individuals with higher differentiation would mean that they would have a better ability to distinguish their thoughts and feelings from their family members', which would enable them to interact more responsively than reactively (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Yet the concept of differentiation may not be properly applied to Koreans living in South Korea where close family kinships are highly valued. South Korean families who emphasize togetherness and family unity might be viewed as less differentiated and yet they may still maintain healthy family functioning. In this regard, the present study investigated how levels of differentiation were related to family functioning, family communication, and family satisfaction in South Koreans. This study also explored if there were differences among different age groups of South Koreans with regard to the level of differentiation.

DIFFERENTIATION AND FAMILY FUNCTIONING IN SOUTH KOREANS

Kerr and Bowen (1988) stated that a family was an emotional unit, in that the members of the family responded in similar and repetitive ways. In families well differentiated members were able to maintain both their autonomy and intimacy with other family members effectively. A poorly differentiated family, on the other hand, struggled with the pressures of togetherness which inhibited family members from becoming autonomous individuals (Kerr & Bowen). Furthermore, the lack of autonomy in the poorly differentiated family could create a high intensity of reactivity among the family members (Kerr & Bowen, 1988; Papero, 1990).

Based on the BFST, the togetherness pressure within South Korean families might lower differentiation levels in their family members and increase their reactivity to one another. Yet an important consideration is that South Korean society *highly values* togetherness and interdependency in families. South Koreans' family values have been influenced by Confucianism for several hundred years (Kim & Rye, 2005; Shon & Ja, 1982). Confucianism stresses clear hierarchical roles among family members and close family and kinship networks. (Shon & Ja, 1982). Indeed, Confucianism is still deeply embedded in the structure, relationships, and roles of South Korean families. For instance, people value the family unit to a great extent, and familial harmony and interdependence among family members are stressed. Also,

according to the hierarchical roles of Confucianism, children are educated to respect and obey their parents (Kim & Rye, 2005; Lee & Mock, 2005). Lastly, within the traditional Korean culture, an individual is viewed as a product of *all* the generations of his or her family. Thus, individuals are not only closely connected with their extended families but obligated to continue their family names to the next generation (Kim & Rye, 2005; Shon & Ja, 1982). Due to the close family kinship, South Koreans might be measured as having low levels of differentiation on a western assessment scale. However, the culturally accepted family value, togetherness, could still permit them to maintain healthy family functioning.

At the same time, it is important to look into fast-changing cultural values in South Koreans during the last a couple of decades. South Koreans have increasingly adopted American culture and values, which could possibly influence South Korean family functioning. In fact, younger South Koreans appear to enjoy the American culture and to have adopted its individualistic values more than older generations (Yi, 1993). For instance, younger South Koreans are more likely to be independent from their parents by living only with their romantic partner after marriage. This living style is actually quite different from the traditional norm of the collectivistic Korean culture that values married children living with their parents in order to be able to care for them. When considering the greater influence of American individualistic and autonomous values on younger South Koreans, it is expected that younger South Koreans might be assessed to have higher differentiation levels than older ones.

Based on the theoretical framework of BFST and the likely greater influence of the individualistic American culture on younger South Koreans, the present study developed two hypotheses: (1) Younger South Koreans will have higher levels of differentiation than older South Koreans and (2) South Koreans with higher levels of differentiation will have healthier family functioning, more positive family communication, and greater family satisfaction.

METHOD

Participants

A total of 235 Koreans living in South Korea were recruited for this study and the sample size was proper to maintain adequate statistical power in this study (Cohen, 1992). The participants in the study ranged in age from 20 to 70 years. There were more female participants (75%) than male participants (25%). The majority of participants were living with their partners or other family members, and none of married participants aged between 20 and 29 years lived with their parents. The level of education of the participants was high; the majority of participants was either attending college or had a college or a post-college degree.

Measures

DIFFERENTIATION LEVEL

Individual's differentiation level was measured with a Korean version of Differentiation of Self Inventory-Revised (DSI-R; Skowron & Schmitt, 2003). The DSI-R includes four different subscales: Emotional Reactivity, "I" Position, Emotional Cutoff, and Fusion with Others. These four subscales used in this study showed good reliability: Emotional Reactivity ($\alpha = .83$), "I" Position ($\alpha = .77$), Emotional Cutoff ($\alpha = .81$), and Fusion with Others ($\alpha = .78$).

FAMILY FUNCTIONING

A Korean version of Family Adaptability and Cohesion Evaluation Scale (FACES) IV (Olson, 2011) was used to assess individual's family functioning. The FACES-IV has six subscales, which generate three ratio scores (Cohesion, Flexibility, and Total Circumplex). When the Total Circumplex ratio is one or higher, the family system is viewed as more balanced and functional. In the current investigation, reliability of the six subscales was adequate: Balanced Cohesion ($\alpha = .81$), Balanced Flexibility ($\alpha = .77$), Chaotic ($\alpha = .79$), Enmeshed ($\alpha = .65$), Disengaged ($\alpha = .66$), and Rigid ($\alpha = .66$).

FAMILY SATISFACTION AND FAMILY COMMUNICATION

A Korean version of the revised 10-item Family Satisfaction Scale (Olson, 1995) was used to measure individual's family satisfaction. A higher score on the scale indicates greater satisfaction in family system. In the present study, the Family Satisfaction scale had a good reliability ($\alpha = .94$). Individual's family communication was assessed with a Korean version of the revised 10 item Family Communication Scale based on the parent-Adolescent Communication scale, developed by Barnes and Olson (1985). The Family Communication scale in this current study had a good internal consistency ($\alpha = .93$).

RESULTS

Levels of Differentiation in South Koreans

To test hypothesis 1 that younger South Koreans will have higher levels of differentiation than older South Koreans, an analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted with four different age groups as the fixed variable and differentiation as the dependent variable. There was a significant linear trend $F(3, 231) = 12.01, p = .000$, indicating that older South Koreans showed higher differentiation levels than younger ones. The result did not support

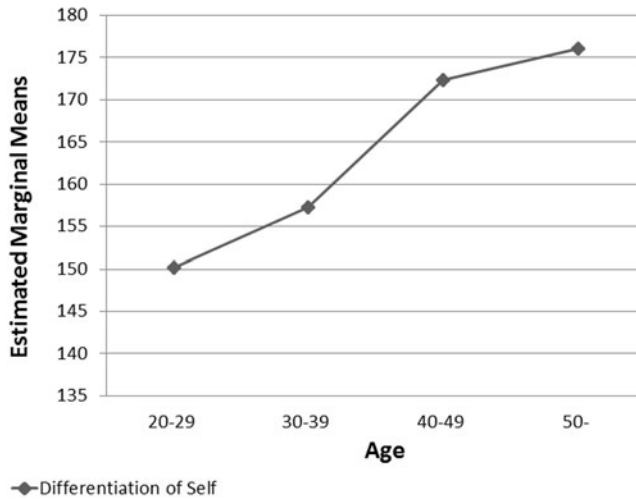


FIGURE 1 Differentiation levels of different age groups.

the hypothesis 1. Figure 1 shows different mean scores according to different age groups.

Differentiation and Korean Family Functioning, Communication, and Satisfaction

In order to test the hypothesis 2, a multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) was conducted with family functioning, family satisfaction, and family communication as dependent variables, a high differentiation group and a low differentiation group as a factor, and age and gender as the covariates. This multivariate general linear model was significant for family functioning, family satisfaction, and family communication (all p 's < .001). Using Pillai's trace, there were significant effects of differentiation levels on family functioning, family satisfaction, and family communication ($V = 0.18$; $F(3, 228) = 16.71$, $p < .001$). Univariate significant between-subject effects were found for family functioning $F(1, 230) = 38.11$, $p < .001$, for family satisfaction $F(1, 230) = 17.28$, $p < .001$, and for family communication $F(1, 230) = 35.98$, $p < .001$. It indicates that the high differentiation group reported higher levels of family functioning, greater family satisfaction, and more positive family communication when compared to the low differentiation group.

To examine the relationship between differentiation and South Korean family functioning more specifically, two separated multiple regressions were performed with two different dependent variables: balanced cohesion ratio and balanced flexibility ratio of FACES-IV. For the regression predicting the balanced levels of cohesion, the overall model was significant with $F(8, 191) = 12.75$, $p = .000$, and explained 32% of the variance. Among independent

variables, *I-Position* and *Emotional Cutoff* were significantly related to the balanced levels of cohesion, $t = 2.25$, $p < .05$, and $t = 8.12$, $p < .001$ respectively. *Fusion* was also significantly and yet negatively related to the balanced levels of cohesion, $t = -2.43$, $p < .05$. This result indicates that individuals who had more fused relationships with others were more likely to have balanced levels of cohesion in their family functioning. For the regression predicting the balanced levels of flexibility, the overall model was significant with $F(8, 191) = 10.03$, $p = .000$, and explained 27% of the variance. Among independent variables, *I-Position* and *Emotional Cutoff* were significantly related to balanced levels of flexibility, $t = 2.38$, $p < .05$ and $t = 5.60$, $p < .001$ respectively.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study showed that *older* South Koreans had higher differentiation levels than younger South Koreans. The clear and significant linear trend in age with regard to differentiation levels in the South Korean participants was a valuable finding. Bowen (1978) did not directly discuss the relationship between age and the level of differentiation. However, he did propose that changes in differentiation required many years to accomplish. When considering the life-long process of differentiation of self, individuals might enhance their differentiation level as they grow older. Another consideration regarding this finding is the possible effect of Korean War in the 1950s on South Koreans. Indeed, older generations of South Koreans were more likely under the influence of the war and subsequent life challenges than younger ones. The national crisis and separation among family members during the war could have affected their differentiation levels to be higher.

This finding has an important implication for how mental health professionals assist South Korean families, especially when older family members show greater differentiation than younger family members. Traditionally in South Korean culture elders are respected for their wisdom. Thus, older family members' have both cognitive and emotional skills and can serve as guides for younger family members in therapy. In this regard, family therapists can encourage the elders to share how they developed and/or maintained the high differentiation, such as their abilities to remain calm and think, take "I positions", and remain in close emotional connection even during stressful events and conflictual situations. The elders' high differentiation can be used as an important therapeutic resource as well as a wise and calming force within the family. Depending upon each family's preferences and permission, elders could be consulted by phone, video-chat, or invited to participate in as many sessions as they wish.

Our results showed that South Koreans in the higher differentiation group had healthier family functioning, greater family satisfaction, and more positive family communication than those in the lower differentiation group. The results suggest that mental health professionals should consider differentiation as an important factor which can positively influence healthy family functioning for individuals living in the Korean culture. This study also found that among differentiation measurement subscales, the “I” position had a significant effect on both balanced levels of cohesion and flexibility in Korean family systems. According to Bowen Family Systems Theory (Bowen, 1978), capacity to take the “I” position indicated the ability to act in terms of what “I” think, and to take the responsibility for the resultant success or failure of one’s own action. It suggests that South Koreans, who acted according to their own thoughts and took responsibility for the consequences of these actions, were more likely to have healthy family functioning: with well-balanced cohesion and flexibility among family members. South Koreans in our sample reported lower emotional cutoff with others had more balanced levels of cohesion in their family systems. This suggests that South Koreans who are less likely to choose emotional cutoff with others are more likely to construct healthy and balanced connection among family members.

At the same time, this study found that South Koreans who reported more fusion with others scored higher *balanced* levels of cohesion in their family functioning. The result did not support the aspect of the original Bowen Family Systems Theory that viewed fusion with others as a negative influence on healthy family functioning. Previously, a higher score on the fusion statements of DSI-R was meant to be interpreted as demonstrating fusion with other family members. However, many of these fusion statements might have been more positively interpreted by our Korean participants. For instance, a fusion statement “I want to live up to my parents’ expectations of me” is closely related to the Korean family values that children obey and respect their parents and follow their guidance to a great extent (Kim & Rye, 2005). Thereby, high scores on these fusion statements might need to be interpreted as indicating high levels of socially congruent family unity and social support, which actually *positively* contributes to Korean family functioning. The results suggest that mental health professionals working with South Korean families should distinguish strong family unity and togetherness among Korean family members from fusion that impedes healthy family functioning. Indeed, for cultures in which tight-knit families are revered, perhaps the Western mislabel of fusion may be need to be replaced by something more akin to concepts that denotes collaborative health, such as *solidarity*.

Limitations and Future Research

How age affects differentiation levels in South Koreans remains unclear and warrants further cross-cultural investigation. Future research should

investigate the relationship between age and differentiation with a focus on how differentiation levels might change across the lifespan, and whether major life challenges mediate and moderate age's influence. Although the present study made a great effort to ensure the reliability and validity of the differentiation and family functioning instruments, it is necessary to develop culturally sensitive instruments that can accurately measure differentiation levels and healthy family functioning in South Koreans. Lastly, future research should perform similar studies with people living in other collectivistic cultures such as China, Japan, and India. The results will help to demonstrate, more accurately, whether differentiation is an important factor contributing to healthy family functioning in both collectivistic and individualistic cultures.

In spite of these limitations, this study has made valuable contributions to the concept of differentiation of self in the Bowen Family Systems Theory literature. No matter how valuable and effective mental health theories and interventions are, they can lead us in a wrong direction if they are used for diverse cultural groups without proper cultural considerations. We hope that this study encourages marriage and family therapists and researchers around the world to be active in evaluating various MFT theories before applying them to people of different cultures.

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