The differentiation of self and the capacity to tolerate interpersonal difference and societal expectations: an exploratory study
Denis John O’Haraa, John Meteyardb

a University of Abertay, Tayside Institute of Health Studies, Kydd Building, Dundee, United Kingdom b Australian Catholic University, Bango, QLD, Australia c Christian Heritage College, School of Social Sciences, Brisbane, Australia

First published on: 25 May 2011

To cite this Article O’Hara, Denis John and Meteyard, John(2011) 'The differentiation of self and the capacity to tolerate interpersonal difference and societal expectations: an exploratory study', Asia Pacific Journal of Counselling and Psychotherapy, First published on: 25 May 2011 (iFirst)

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/21507686.2011.557772
URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/21507686.2011.557772

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE
The differentiation of self and the capacity to tolerate interpersonal difference and societal expectations: an exploratory study

Denis John O’Haraa,b* and John Meteyardc

aUniversity of Abertay, Tayside Institute of Health Studies, Kydd Building, Dundee, DD11HG United Kingdom; bAustralian Catholic University, 1100 Nudgee Road, Bango QLD 4014, Australia; cChristian Heritage College, School of Social Sciences, P.O. Box 2246, Mansfield BC, Brisbane, 4122 Australia

(Received 12 October 2010; in final form 22 January 2011)

Murray Bowen developed one of the most influential and long-standing family systems therapies: Multigenerational Family Therapy. His central theoretical construct is the ‘differentiation of self’. Differentiation is the capacity to establish and maintain a solid sense of self in the context of relationship pressures and emotional demands. While Bowen’s theory has enjoyed popularity, it is only in more recent years that his central construct has been tested via the development of new inventories. Skowron and Friedlander based their Differentiation of Self Inventory on four factors; I-Position, Emotional Reactivity, Emotional Cut-off and Emotional Fusion. While these factors have served to give insight into the structure of the differentiation of self, questions remain as to whether they provide a full and sufficient representation of the complexity of this construct. The following investigation extends Skowron and Friedlander’s research by investigating whether other factors form a fundamental part of the differentiation of self. Two new potential constructs were suggested by the study: one, the significance of an individual’s capacity to tolerate interpersonal difference and, two, the importance of societal expectations on self differentiation, especially in collectivist cultures.

Keywords: differentiation of self; interpersonal difference; societal expectations; self-soothing

Introduction

Murray Bowen (Bowen 1976, 1978; Kerr & Bowen, 1988) developed a multigenerational family systems theory which has maintained favour over the past 40 years among family therapists as an informative theory on which to base practice guidelines and interventions. Bowen proposed eight theoretical constructs to explain individual and family dynamics: Differentiation of Self; Multi-generational Transmission; Triangulation; Fusion and Emotional Cut-Off; Family Projection; Sibling Position; Societal Emotional Processes; and Nuclear Family Emotional System. Central to the theory is the notion of the differentiation of self. Differentiation can be defined as ‘the capacity of the individual to function autonomously by making self directed choices, while remaining emotionally connected to the intensity of a significant relationship system’ (Brown, 1999, p. 95). The highly
differentiated person, according to Bowen, has the capacity to distinguish thoughts from feelings and to remain in touch with strong feelings whilst maintaining logical reasoning. Differentiation is understood to reflect a developmental progression both within the individual and within the family across generations as a whole. The less differentiated person or family system is more emotionally reactive and less able to remain calm and logical in the face of emotional challenges. The central construct of differentiation influences and is influenced by the other seven of Bowen’s theoretical constructs mentioned above (Kerr & Bowen, 1988).

Kerr and Bowen (1988) understood differentiation to have both intrapsychic and interpersonal dimensions. At the intrapsychic level, differentiation of self is the ability to distinguish thoughts from feelings and to choose between being guided by one’s intellect or one’s emotions. At the interpersonal level, differentiation is the ability to experience intimacy with and independence from others. Undifferentiated individuals either are overly conforming and compliant, or they assume a pseudo-independence that is ultimately emotionally reactive to others. Kerr and Bowen (1988) argued that ‘chronic anxiety increases as level of differentiation decreases’ (p. 117).

As the differentiation of self forms a foundational plank in Bowen’s theory of Multigeneration Family Systems Theory most early research efforts were focused on establishing a valid measure of differentiation (Bray, Williamson, & Malone, 1984; Hovestadt, Anderson, Piercy, Cochran, & Fine; 1985; Kear, 1978; McCollum, 1991). Kear (1978) developed a scale to measure differentiation but attempts to validate it were not successful. A later scale, the Personal Authority in the Family System Questionnaire (PAFS-Q), developed by Bray, Williamson and Harvey (1987), which measured seven constructs supportive of Bowen’s theory (Spousal Fusion/Individuation; Intergenerational Fusion/Individuation; Spousal Intimacy; Intergenerational Intimacy; Nuclear Family Triangulation; Intergenerational Triangulation; Intergenerational Intimidation; and Personal Authority) did prove successful and added credibility to Bowen’s ideas. The PAFS-Q did not specifically measure differentiation of self but did capture many multigenerational aspects of Bowen’s theory.

**Measuring the differentiation of self**

During the 1990s several scales were developed to measure the differentiation of self, demonstrating psychometric validity. The first of these was Haber’s Level of Differentiation of Self Scale (1993) followed by Skowron and Friedlander’s (1998) 43-item Differentiation of Self Inventory, later expanded to a 46-item inventory by Skowron and Schmitt (2003), and Chabot’s 17-item scale (Licht & Chabot, 2006). Haber’s Level of Differentiation Scale measured selected dimensions of the Bowen’s theory of differentiation by providing two subscales, Emotional Maturity (EM) and Emotional Dependency. The Cronbach $\alpha$ reliability score was high at 0.90 and the expected correlations with the State/Trait Inventory, the Life Experience Survey and the Behavior Checklist were all high at the $p < 0.01$ level of significance or greater. Chabot’s scale focused on the intrapsychic dimension of differentiation arguing that problems have existed with other measures when attempting to capture interpersonal dimensions of differentiation (Licht & Chabot, 2006). The Chabot Emotional Differentiation Scale has received Cronbach $\alpha$ reliability scores of between 0.81 and 0.86 and high external construct validity ratings when compared with a number of related measures including the Differentiation in the Family Systems Scale (Anderson & Sabatelli, 1992), The Psychological Separation Inventory (Hoffman, 1984), and the Permeability of Boundaries Scale (Oliver, Aries, & Batgos, 1989).
Skowron and Friedlander (1998) acknowledged the intrapsychic and interpersonal dimensions of differentiation and therefore included four subscales, two capturing the intrapsychic dimension and two capturing the interpersonal dimension. The two intrapsychic factors were *I-Position* and *Emotional Reactivity* while the two interpersonal factors were *Emotional Cut-Off* and *Emotional Fusion*. Skowron and Friedlander developed their Differentiation of Self Inventory through principal components analysis recognizing the multidimensionality of the construct and its relationship with many of Bowen’s other seven theoretical constructs. The results of the validation studies provided support for internal reliability for the scale as a whole and for the respective subscales: DSI = 0.88; Emotional Reactivity = 0.83; Reactive Distancing = 0.80; Fusion with Parents = 0.82; and I-Position = 0.80. The subscale correlations with the DSI full scale were moderate to high: 0.59 (Fusion with Parents), 0.65 (I-Position), 0.75 (Reactive Distancing) and 0.80 (Emotional Reactivity). The correlations with the subscales were also small to moderate. The DSI construct validity was supported by correlations with the State Trait Inventory (STAI-T) (Spielberger, Gorsuch, & Lushene, 1970).

**Other potential components of differentiation**

One of the difficulties in exploring the nature of differentiation is its multidimensionality. There are many features that influence an individual’s level of differentiation. Skowron and Friedlander (1998) have added significantly to our understanding of the construct especially as they have explored both intrapsychic and interpersonal dimensions. Other commentators suggest that there may be other salient aspects of differentiation which have yet to be recognized. Schnarch (1997), a popular writer in family therapy who bases much of his work on Bowen’s theory, suggests that self-soothing is an important dimension of differentiation. Bomar and Sabatelli (1996), Gushue and Constantine (2003), Gushue and Sicalides (1997), and Skowron (2004) suggest that the capacity to tolerate interpersonal difference is also an aspect of differentiation.

Another potential component of differentiation is the influence of societal expectations on self-definition. Kerr and Bowen (1988) hypothesized that there were natural, ecological factors governing social units which were related to survival instincts. They argued that these survival factors automatically marshal relational processes that seek to protect the kinship group thus distinguishing between in-group and out-groups but also placing pressure on ingroup behaviour. A range of studies (Bond & Smith, 1996; Iyengar & Lepper, 1999; Kim & Markus, 1999) have acknowledged the importance of societal expectations on the individual and social relationships. To date, these factors have not been included in any scales used to measure differentiation. One of the aims of this study was to explore if these factors, in particular, were likely to demonstrate any significance in influencing an individual’s level of differentiation. To this end, a questionnaire was developed to explore a wider spectrum of differentiation based on Bowen’s original eight constructs but with the inclusion of the three new hypothesized constructs of self-soothing, tolerating interpersonal difference, resisting societal expectations as well as previously uninvestigated dimensions of Bowen’s original theory.

**Study 1**

The purpose of this first study was to investigate specific factors that contribute to overall differentiation of the self. In addition to the four empirically generated factors previously recognized by Skowron and Friedlander (1998) and Skowron and Schmitt (2003) (i.e. Emotional Reactivity, I-Position, Emotional Cutoff and Fusion), additional theoretical
factors discussed within the literature as potential aspects of differentiation, were identified. These included Triangulation and Over- or Under-functioning (Bowen, 1978), Conflict Management (Kerr & Bowen, 1988), Self-Soothing and Emotional Connection (Schnarch, 1991), Tolerating Interpersonal Difference (Bomar & Sabatelli, 1996; Gushue & Sicalides, 1997) and Resisting Societal Expectations (Bond & Smith, 1996; Iyengar & Lepper, 1999). Descriptions and definitions of these 11 constructs were then used to generate 80 items to be used as the basis of a principal components analysis.

Method
Participants
Staff and students of a small, higher education provider in eastern Australia were initially approached to take part in the study. Usable questionnaires were obtained from 103 participants including 69 women (67%) and 34 men (33%) ranging in age from 18 to 67 years with a mean age of 42 years (SD = 11.9 years). Approval was obtained by the institution’s Ethics Committee for the study and appropriate consent procedures were followed.

Instruments
In addition to the 80-item questionnaire described above, participants also completed the Differentiation of Self Inventory-Revised (DSI-R) (Skowron & Schmitt, 2003) and the Trait component of the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI-T) (Spielberger et al., 1970). The DSI-R is a well-validated and widely used 46-item self-report measure generating an overall differentiation of self score as well as subscale scores for the four factors described above. Higher scores on the DSI-R indicate greater levels of differentiation. Internal consistency reliability of the DSI and DSI-R calculated using Cronbach’s $\alpha$ were reported by the developers as 0.88 and 0.92 respectively (Skowron & Schmitt, 2003).

The STAI-T comprises 20 items and is a well-validated measure of an individual’s chronic anxiety which remains relatively unaffected by external stressors. Cronbach $\alpha$ measures of internal consistency for the STAI-T have ranged from 0.86 to 0.92, while test–retest reliability over a 3 month period was reported to be 0.75 (Spielberger et al., 1970).

Based on the original theory of Kerr and Bowen (1988) that individuals with lower levels of personal differentiation are prone to experience higher levels of chronic anxiety, Skowron and Friedlander (1998) used the high level of correlation demonstrated between the STAI-T and the DSI ($r = 0.64, p < 0.0001$) to argue in support of the construct validity of the latter.

Procedure
The three questionnaires described above were distributed to approximately 50 staff and 200 social science students. Those solicited also received a cover letter explaining the nature, confidentiality and anonymity of the research, as well as a brief demographic questionnaire. A total of 103 participants returned useable questionnaires using the institution’s internal mail system.

Results
An initial principal components analysis was conducted on responses to the 80-item questionnaire using a varimax rotation in an attempt to identify discrete dimensions of
differentiation. This was similar in approach to that used by Skowron and Friedlander (1998) to develop the DSI, in which an initial pool of 96 items generated by the research team and based on theoretical constructions of differentiation was reduced to a final set of 43 questions (later increased to 46 for the DSI-R; Skowron & Schmitt, 2003) using empirical analysis. As Skowron and Friedlander (1998) explain ‘(t)o have created subscales based solely on our own biases as to the relative importance of these theoretical constructs seemed less rigorous (cf. Jackson, 1970) than allowing respondents’ ratings to help determine the salient dimensions of the measure’ (p. 237).

This principal components analysis identified five components with eigenvalues greater than 3.0 and ranging in size from 19.17 to 3.02. These five components accounted for 44.2% of the overall variance. Only the 73 items with an individual loading of at least 0.40 on a discrete components were retained and the resulting set of statements was renamed the Differentiation Factor Inventory-1 (DFI-1). The five components were: component 1 (18 items) – predominately items based on the theoretical constructs of self-soothing, fusion and tolerating diversity; component 2 (19 items) – predominately items related to emotional cutoff and emotional connection; component 3 (18 items) – drawn from questions related to a range of theoretical factors including triangulation and boundaries; and components 4 and 5 (both with 9 items) – related to a range of theoretical factors with no easily definable relationship.

Cronbach’s $\alpha$ calculations were performed on the 73 item DFI-1 and each of the five subscales to determine internal consistency reliabilities (DFI-1, $\alpha = 0.95$; component 1 $\alpha = 0.92$; component 2, $\alpha = 0.92$; component 3, $\alpha = 0.88$; component 4, $\alpha = 0.58$; and component 5, $\alpha = 0.51$). To ascertain the level of construct validity of the DFI-1, correlations were performed with scores from the DSI-R and the STAI-T. Positive correlations were demonstrated in both cases with total DFI-1 scores significantly predicting both Trait Anxiety as measured by the STAI-T ($r = 0.69, p < 0.0001$) and differentiation of self as indicated by the DSI-R ($r = 0.805, p < 0.0001$). Significantly, the correlation between the DSI-R and STAI-T scores of our sample was also $r = 0.69, p < 0.0001$. Both of these results support the construct validity of the DFI-1.

However, while these results were encouraging, it was apparent that the 73 item DFI-1 possessed a number of inherent limitations. These included a certain ambiguity in the wording of some items and a lack of representation of items from some significant theoretical construct groups (e.g. emotional reactivity), possibly due to these factors not being sufficiently present in the initial 80-item questionnaire. It was also decided, following suggestions by some theorists that differentiation is a construct that is inherently biased against more collectivist cultures due to its strong emphasis on individuation, that there was an under-representation of people from such cultures in the sample used in Study 1 (Gushue & Constantine, 2003; Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

**Study 2**

For these reasons a new 88 item questionnaire was designed that included the 80 items used in Study 1 (with a small number reviewed to improve clarity), as well as eight new items designed by the researchers to more specifically reflect the theoretical construct of emotional reactivity. Based on the strong relationship between the DFI-1 and both the DSI-R and the STAI-T in Study 1, it was decided that it was not necessary to administer the STAI-T within the second study.
Method

Participants
Permission was obtained from a Korean-language church based in Australia and a further two tertiary education institutions to recruit participants for the second study. The participants from the Korean church were either Korean nationals working in Australia or Korean immigrants to Australia. Participants from the tertiary education institutions were from a university on the east coast of Australia and a Bible seminary in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The revised 88-question inventory was distributed to 20 interested members of the Korean-language church, 20 first year undergraduate psychology students from the Australian university and 45 undergraduate and postgraduate pastoral counselling students from the Malaysian seminary. Nine, 18 and 20 questionnaires were received back from these three groups of participants, respectively. In addition, commencing undergraduate and postgraduate social science students and undergraduate education students from the higher education provider that participated in Study 1 were also invited to participate at the beginning of a new academic year. Of the 175 students in this category who were approached, 66 or 37.7% agreed to participate. This resulted in a total of 113 participants, 29 of who were of Malaysian or Korean ethnicity, ranging in age from 18 to 71 years (mean age 37.3; SD = 13.5). There was a total of 88 women (77.9%) and 25 men (22.1%), of whom 75 (31.9%) were partnered and 67 (59.3%) had children (two respondents did not indicate partnership status or whether they had children). Appropriate ethics approval was sought for the study and ethics procedures followed.

Instruments
Each of the participants received and completed the DSI-R (Skowron and Schmitt, 2003) used in Study 1 and the revised 88 item questionnaire described above.

Procedure
The two questionnaires described above, as well as a cover letter explaining the nature and anonymity of the research, a brief demographic questionnaire and, in the case of the Malaysian seminary students, a stamped and addressed return envelope, were distributed to students at the end of on-campus lectures. The questionnaires were distributed to the Korean church members by a church administrator to those who indicated interest in the study. All students were proficient in both spoken and written forms of English. A total of 113 participants returned two usable questionnaires by internal institutional mail (the Australian university and College students), by post (the Malaysian students) and via the church office (Korean-language church members).

Results
A principal components analysis using a varimax rotation of participant responses to the revised 88-item questionnaire resulted in identification of four discrete components with eigenvalues greater than 3.0. These components accounted for 32% of the overall variance. This was similar to the results of Study 1; however, components were more easily interpreted than was the case in the first study. Component 1 consisted of 19 items predominately drawn from the ‘I-Position’ and ‘Emotional Reactivity’ theoretical question sets. Component 2, with 14 items, was defined as ‘Emotional Cutoff’ while component 3 (11 items) focused on ‘Fusion with Significant Others’. Finally, component 4 included...
eight items all of which were drawn from either the pool of questions relating to ‘Tolerating Interpersonal Difference’ or ‘Societal Expectations’.

Participant answers to positively worded questions relating to Emotional Reactivity, Fusion, Cutoff and Societal Expectations were reversed so that final scores reflected behaviour consistent with higher levels of differentiation. Scores for questions were then summed to yield totals for each of the four subscales. A grand total was also calculated for all 52 questions comprising the individual subscales. These 52 questions were pooled and from hereon are referred to as the Differentiation Factor Inventory. Higher total scores on the DFI represent higher overall levels of differentiation.

It was immediately apparent that three of the four factors involved in differentiation identified in this study were similar to those reported by Skowron and Friedlander (1998) and Skowron and Schmitt (2003) (Emotional Reactivity, I-Position, Emotional Cutoff and Fusion with Others). Not surprisingly, component 1 scores from the DFI, comprising questions relating to both Emotional Reactivity and I-Position were most correlated with The DSI-R Emotional Reactivity subscale scores ($r = 0.81, p < 0.0001$).

Component 2 of the DFI (Emotional Cutoff) was only moderately correlated with DSI-R subscales; however, the strongest correlation ($r = 0.55, p < 0.0001$) predictably occurred with DSI-R Emotional Cutoff scores. Somewhat surprisingly, correlations between component 3 of the DFI (Fusion with Significant Others) and DSI-R subscales indicated the highest degree of relatedness with DSI-R Factor 1 (Emotional Reactivity), $r = 0.69, p < 0.0001$. The second highest correlation ($r = 0.52, p < 0.0001$) was demonstrated with the DSI-R Fusion with parents subscale. It should be noted that in the DFI, fusion was conceptualized as fusion with others, not specifically with parents. Whether this variation from Skowron and Friedlander’s use of fusion impacts outcomes or not is unknown. It is acknowledged that these correlations are moderate but given the exploratory nature of this study, they do provide some support for the possibility that the differentiation of self as a construct may be better conceptualized with the inclusion of additional factors.

Correlations comparing DFI component 4 (Tolerating Interpersonal Difference) scores with all four DSI-R subscales showed low to moderate levels of correlation. These ranged from $r = 0.31, p < 0.0001$ with Emotional Cutoff to $r = 0.56, p < 0.0001$ for Emotional Reactivity. These were all lower than the correlation between the DFI Tolerating Interpersonal Difference scores and DSI-R total scores ($r = 0.61, p < 0.0001$). Finally, a correlation was performed between total scores obtained for the DSI-R and the DFI, indicating a very high degree of relatedness between the two measures of differentiation ($r = 0.83, p < 0.0001$). This result lends support to the construct validity of the DFI.

Values of Cronbach’s $\alpha$ were calculated to ascertain the internal consistency level for the DFI as a whole, as well as for the four subscales. High reliabilities were suggested in each case: DFI $= 0.93$; Emotional Reactivity/I-Position $= 0.88$; Emotional Cutoff $= 0.83$; Fusion with Significant Others $= 0.81$; Tolerating Interpersonal Difference $= 0.72$. Correlations between the full-scale DFI and each of the four subscales demonstrated moderate to high levels of relatedness: Emotional Reactivity/I-Position ($r = 0.88, p < 0.0001$); Emotional Cutoff ($r = 0.77, p < 0.0001$); Fusion with Others ($r = 0.78, p < 0.0001$); and Tolerating Interpersonal Difference ($r = 0.64, p < 0.0001$). Inter-subscale correlations were all moderate: Emotional Reactivity/I-Position and Emotional Cutoff ($r = 0.51$); Emotional Reactivity/I-Position and Fusion with Significant Others ($r = 0.59$); Emotional Reactivity/I-Position and Tolerating Interpersonal Difference ($r = 0.54$); Emotional Cutoff and Fusion with Significant Others ($r = 0.50$); Emotional Cutoff and Tolerating Interpersonal Difference
Finally, DFI scores from the 29 participants from Malaysian and Korean cultural backgrounds were extracted for the purpose of separate analysis. A principal components analysis of this group’s results identified five components with eigenvalues above 3.0 and loading at a value of at least 0.40 on a single factor. Four of the components were very similar in composition to the subscales obtained from results of the full sample as described above. However the fifth component \((n = 9)\) mainly consisted of questions relating to conformity to societal expectations and the values and opinions of others. Interestingly, the items from this novel component were drawn from the set of questions which had originally been composed to reflect the theoretical factor, Societal Expectations.

**Discussion**

Results of this study generally supported findings of previously reported studies which have sought to investigate component dimensions of self-differentiation. Two of the components identified as relating to differentiation by this research (Emotional Cutoff and Fusion with Significant Others) are very similar in composition to differentiation subscales reported by Skowron and Friedlander (1998) and Skowron and Schmitt (2003). A third component (component 1, I-Position/Emotional Reactivity) appears to combine attributes of the remaining two components demonstrated by these researchers. These findings lend support to the validity of Skowron and Friedlander’s seminal research investigating the dimensions of differentiation, as well as to the original theoretical description of differentiation posited by Bowen (1978).

It is unclear why principal components analysis of data obtained from participants of this study failed to more clearly differentiate between the constructs of I-Position and Emotional Reactivity as was the case with Skowron and Friedlander (1998). However, when the original questions devised to reflect the theoretical construct of ‘I-Position’ from the 88 item questionnaire used in part 2 of this study are considered, it is apparent that they may not adequately capture certain dimensions of this aspect of self-differentiation. For example, no questions from this group of items were specifically designed to appraise self-esteem, self-acceptance or stability of self-concept under stress, each of which comprise important aspects of the I-Position subscale of the DSI-R (Skowron and Schmitt, 2003). It is possible, therefore, that the failure of our study to separate the I-Position and Emotional Reactivity dimensions of differentiation was due to inherent problems with aspects of the measuring instrument. It is significant to note, however, that these two previously identified factors of differentiation that grouped in our study are both intrapsychic rather than interpersonal aspects of differentiation of the self. Given this common characteristic, it is less surprising that it proved more difficult to separate the two factors.

**Tolerating Interpersonal Difference**

The other major aim of this study, that is, to identify other potential aspects of differentiation (e.g. Self-Soothing, Tolerating Interpersonal Difference, Societal Expectations, Triangulation and Over- or Under-functioning) that have been theorized but never empirically verified, was only partially realized. Despite their preliminary nature, the results of this study do support the suggestion that the capacity to manage interpersonal difference is an aspect of differentiation of the self and warrants further investigation. The findings that questions related to one’s ability to tolerate interpersonal difference (and to a lesser extent
manage societal expectations) grouped as a distinct component, and that this component possesses only a modest capacity to predict the four subscales described by Skowron and Schmitt (2003), suggest that tolerating interpersonal difference may indeed be a distinct aspect of differentiation.

The likelihood that the capacity to tolerate interpersonal differences is an important component of differentiation has support in other research. Skowron (2004) suggested that higher levels of differentiation are likely to predict a greater ability to tolerate difference in one’s partner. Such differences are often highlighted in a number of family of origin variables relating to internalized perceptions and expectation around such topics as finances, child rearing, sexual intimacy, use of leisure time or household tasks (Sabatelli & Bartle-Haring, 2003; Synder, Heyman & Haynes, 2005). Researchers have also identified differences in gender perceptions and processing which influence relationship satisfaction (Gottman & Driver, 2005; Peleg, 2008; Sabatelli, & Bartle-Haring, 2003). While a number of these variables appear to represent different evolutionary adaptations, they are likely to be interrelated with psychological constructs such as the differentiation of self.

What is of significance for researchers and family therapists is that addressing couples’ capacities to understand and process interpersonal differences is likely to increase their relationship satisfaction. Whether an increase in the ability to process and tolerate interpersonal differences also increases individuals’ levels of self-differentiation is yet unclear; however, we predict that there exists a positive correlation between the two. If future research bears out this supposition, it will provide family therapists with an additional point of focus in their work.

Self-Soothing

The two questions related to the theoretical construct, self-soothing, were not found in any of the factors generated by the component analysis, while the remaining six were spread relatively evenly between the four components described above. Although the relationship between self-soothing and self-differentiation as a whole clearly warrants further attention, these early findings do not suggest that self-soothing is distinguishable as a distinct dimension of differentiation. This is consistent with the suggestion of Esplen and Garfinkel (1998) that self-soothing is best understood as a process related to an individual’s ability (or inability) to modulate his or her emotional reactivity. Significantly, the highest grouping of items (n = 3) from the Self-Soothing subset in the original 88-item questionnaire occurred in component 1 (I-Position/Emotional Reactivity), suggesting tentative support for this hypothesis.

Triangulation and Over- and Under-functioning

Only two items each from subsets designed to quantify the theoretical constructs of triangulation and over- or under-functioning grouped in any of the four components identified in this study. This tends to suggest that neither of these original aspects of Bowen’s theory reliably relates to differentiation of the self (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). This finding is consistent with results of a previous study by Benson, Larson, Wilson, and Demo (1993), who failed to find any relationship between intergenerational triangulation and family anxiety, a known predictor of self-differentiation. No previous studies have sought to verify Bowen’s theory that more differentiated individuals are less likely to engage in either over- or under-functioning.
Asian Sample

Another interesting outcome of Study 2 was the finding that, when the data from the Asian cohort were extracted from the rest of the data, a fifth component began to emerge, that being ‘Societal Expectations’. Although this finding needs to be treated with caution based on the small number of participants in the Asian cohort, it may provide tentative support for the view that people from collectivist cultures tend to place greater significance on societal expectations (Triandis, 1989; Bardi & Schwartz, 1996; Schwartz & Bardi, 1997). Oyserman, Coon and Kemmelmeier (2002), argue that those from collectivist cultures more than those from individualist cultures have a sense of obligation to in-group members. These findings suggest that the differentiation of self may be conceptualized slightly differently across cultures. Markus and Kitayama (1991), in their landmark study of self-construal, acknowledged that differentiation may be structured differently in collectivist cultures. They state, ‘This view of the self and relationship between the self and others features the person not as separate from the social context but as more connected and less differentiated from others’ (p. 227). If differentiation functions slightly differently in collectivist cultures, then it may be necessary to adjust measures of differentiation of self to accommodate cultural variations. If further research does demonstrate that the differentiation of self as a construct needs cross-cultural adjustment especially around how it is defined in terms of self and family relations, then it will impact on how family therapists approach therapy within non-Western family systems frameworks.

Limitations of the study

The limits of the collected study are primarily twofold: one, sample size, and two, quality of question items. To firmly establish reliability and validity of findings it would be preferable to increase the sample size with at least 40% representing Asian participants. The quality of some of the questions needs to be reviewed especially those relating to I-Position and Emotional Reactivity, as these constructs did not clearly separate. As such the findings of this study are best viewed as exploratory in nature; however, they do indicate the potential for further inquiry regarding the influence of additional factors involved in the differentiation of self.

Conclusion

The results of this research project have provided support for the overarching aim of the study, that being to explore and identify dimensions of the differentiation of self beyond those identified by Skowron and Friedlander (1998). There is initial support for the existence of an additional factor in Tolerating Interpersonal Difference, and tentative support for Societal Expectations within an Asian collectivist cohort. There was no evidence for Self-Sothing being a separate factor as it was subsumed by other constructs, particularly I-Position/Emotional Reactivity.

This study provides encouragement for future research on the additional factors which appear to be active in the differentiation of self both within and across cultures. It is hoped that this and further research adds to our understanding of which aspects of differentiation are most problematic in different clinical presentations also providing insight into treatment options and approaches. This research may be particularly beneficial in aiding family therapists address couples and family issues. In general terms, any increase in an individual’s level of differentiation and their resulting capacity to manage defensive responses such as
emotional cut-off and fusion, and interpersonal differences, will only improve the individual’s capacity for relationship and psychological health. It is expected that any expansion in our understanding of the differentiation of self will improve family therapists’ capacity to aid couples and families in general but also that such expansions in our knowledge may suggest cross-cultural adjustments in how we engender growth in differentiation within individuals, couples and families.

Notes on contributors
Denis O’Hara, PhD, is a lecturer in psychology and counselling affiliated with the Australian Catholic University, Brisbane, Australia, and the University of Abertay, Dundee, Scotland. He is a psychotherapist and researcher with research interests in psychotherapy integration, the differentiation of self, worldview, and hope studies.

John Meteyard, PhD, is an experienced psychotherapist, educator, and researcher. For the past ten years he has been a faculty member of Christian Heritage College, Brisbane, Australia where he teaches in the Master of Counselling program. He also maintains a private practice in counselling and conducts research particularly on the topics of worldview, the differentiation of self, and pastoral counselling.

References


