The Relationship Between Bowen’s Concept of Differentiation of Self and Measurements of Mindfulness

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Introduction

- Interest in these Topics

The Problem

- It is critical to validate our family systems theories across constructs.
- Need for more comprehensive integrative theories of mindfulness.

The Problem

- The Bowen Family Systems Theory (Bowen, 1976, 1978)
  - Is one of the most comprehensive explanation for the development of psychological problems from a systemic, relational and multigenerational perspective (Gurman, 1991; Nichols & Schwartz, 1994; Skrown & Friedlander, 1998).
  - Differentiation of Self is key concept.
The Problem

- Differentiation of Self has been conceptualized as an age-appropriate balance of familial connectedness and personal autonomy for individual members and their interpersonal transactions (Bowen, 1976, 1978).
- Poorly differentiated individuals display a lack of stability, low tolerance for individuality, poor intimacy among family members, anxiety, and rigid behavior (Bowen, 1978; Stierlin, 1981; Kerr, 1984; Kerr & Bowen, 1988; Anderson & Sabatelli, 1990).

Differentiation of Self Research

- Chronic anxiety and poor differentiation have been found to be associated. (Carpenter, 1990)
- Couples’ level of differentiation is related to marital adjustment—with males being cut-off and females emotionally fused (high reactivity) (Skowron, 2000)
- Divorced adults report greater differentiation problems (Skowron, 1995)

Differentiation of Self Research

- Poorly differentiated individuals are also easily overwhelmed by emotionality in their family relationships and tend to engage in emotional fusion or emotional cutoff (Kerr & Bowen, 1988).

Significance of the Study

- Bowen’s theory would predict that one’s emotional system or level of differentiation would certainly be a contributing factor to adjustment.
- While Bowen’s theory has been increasing in its empirical support, measuring it against other constructs may still be helpful.
Significance of the Study

- This study tests the generalizability of Bowen’s theory to mindfulness.

- Research in this area can help therapists and social scientists to understand how interpersonal and intergenerational family processes affect an individual’s functioning.

Significance of the Study

- Mindfulness is a concept that has taken quite a hold on the therapeutic world in recent years. Techniques that induce “mindfulness” are increasingly being employed in Western counseling and psychotherapy to help understand and alleviate a variety of conditions.

Statement of the Problem

- In the current empirical literature, clinical interventions based on training in mindfulness skills are described with increasing frequency, and their popularity appears to be growing rapidly.

- This study provides a systemic examination of the theoretical relationship between Bowen’s level of Differentiation and level of mindfulness in an adult sample.

- Participants in this study were assessed for their level of differentiation of self with their level of mindfulness.
Theoretical Framework

**Bowen’s Family Systems Theory** (Bowen, 1976, 1978)

- Recognizes an interplay between biological, genetic, psychological, and sociological factors in determining individual behavior.
- Is a way of understanding present situations in terms of the influence of past relationships or family histories.
- Understands the family as a single emotional unit made up of interlocking relationships existing over many generations.

**Bowen’s Family Systems Theory**

- Attempts to move beyond cause-and-effect thinking to a more comprehensive understanding of the multiple factors which interact across time to produce problems or symptoms.
- Differentiation of self is developed through an intergenerational process but expresses itself in *current* relationships.

Bowen’s Family Systems Theory

- Views most of human life as being guided by emotional forces which to a varying degree can be regulated by an individual's ability to think.
- Suggests that individuals may be able to exercise some choice regarding how much they respond to their automatic emotional response.
- This response can be predicted by an understanding of interpersonal relationships and the functioning of the family unit.

![Figure 1](image-url)
Definitions & Operational Terms

- **Intrapsychic Level of Differentiation:**
  - The ability to distinguish thoughts from feelings and to be able to choose between being guided by one’s intellect or one’s emotions (Bowen, 1976, 1978).

- **Interpersonal Level of Differentiation:**
  - The ability to experience intimacy in relationships, while maintaining a healthy independence from others (Bowen, 1978).

Both terms measured by Skowron & Friendlander (1998) in the DSI.

Mindfulness is a cognitive and emotional strategy that develops a perspective that cultivates the recognition of thoughts and feelings as passing events created in the mind. By practicing the skills of moment-to-moment awareness, one seeks to gain insight into patterns in thoughts, feelings, and interactions with others, and then one can skillfully choose helpful targeted responses rather than automatically reacting in habitual, overlearned or unconscious ways (Teasdale et al. 2000).

The main predictor variable is the level of differentiation of self (e.g., emotional reactivity, emotional fusion, emotional cutoff, I position, and fusion with others), as measured by the Differentiation of Self Inventory (DSI-R).

The dependent variable or criterion variable was mindfulness as measured by Freiburg Mindfulness Inventory (FMI) and/or the Toronto Mindfulness Scale (TMS).

The Procedures

- Subjects for this study were people, aged 18-55
- Research design: ex post facto.
- A multiple regression analysis (the General Linear Model) and correlations were performed to test relationships.
The data in this study were obtained from 140 participants. These individuals were from a non-clinical population, and they were solicited as volunteers. The sample ranged in age from 18 years old to 55 years old. The mean age of the sample was 25.6 years with a standard deviation of 8.67.

The gender representation of the sample was 63.49% female and 36.51% males.

The ethnic background of this sample was primarily Caucasian (65.63%), African American (23.44%) with Asian Americans (4.6%) Latino-Hispanic (2.34%), and Native Americans (1.56%) representing smaller proportions of the sample.

Marital status was most frequently cited as single, never married (38.58%), in a relationship, but not living together (29.92%), married (15.75%) and to a lesser extent—in a relationship, living together (12.60%), and divorced (3.15%).

The sample’s self described Social Economic Status (SES) was 46.88% middle class, 31.25% working class, 13.28% upper middle class, and 8.59% poor.
**Instruments**

- The Differentiation of Self Inventory (DSI=R) (Skowron & Friedlander, 1998)
- Freiburg Mindfulness Inventory (FMI).
- Toronto Mindfulness Scale (TMS).

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**The Differentiation of Self Inventory (DSI)**

- The DSI was designed to estimate four distinct aspects of differentiation.
  - The Four subscale aspects are:
    - Emotional Reactivity (ER)
    - “I” position (IP)
    - Emotional Cutoff (EC)
    - Fusion with Others (FO)

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**Freiburg Mindfulness Inventory (FMI).**

14 item scale

Research has suggested that in the FMI factors could be identified as “Presence” (F1) and “Acceptance” (F2) (Walach, Buchheld Buttenm, Kleinknecht, & Schmidt, 2006).

Further investigation revealed that the substantial negative relationship between mindfulness and anxiety and depression is completely due to the “Acceptance” factor of mindfulness.

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**Toronto Mindfulness Scale (TMS).**

- A 13-item, two-factor structure (Curiosity, De-centering) has been validated in a number of clinical contexts (Davis, Lau, & Cairns, 2009).
The items of Factor 1 (Curiosity) reflect an attitude of wanting to learn more about one’s experiences.

The items of Factor 2 (De-centering) reflect a shift from identifying personally with thoughts and feelings to relating to one’s experience in a wider field of awareness.

Findings

The first set of regression models were used to examine the basic relationship between level of differentiation of self dimensions and mindfulness, independent of sex.

Hypotheses tested whether the Emotional Reactivity (ER), “I” Position (IP), Emotional Cutoff (EC), and Fusion with Others (FO) scores each on their own, accounted for a significant amount of variance in predicting the two measures of mindfulness (FMI more than, TMS).

Findings-FMI

Each Dimension of Differentiation of Self individually did significantly predict mindfulness as measured by Freiburg Mindfulness Inventory (FMI).

I-Position
(IP-FMI, \( t = 1.81, p < .05; R^2 = .023 \))

Findings-FMI

Emotional Cutoff
(ER-FMI, \( t = 1.93, p < .05; R^2 = .026 \))

Fusion with Others
(FO-FMI, \( t = 4.66, p < .001; R^2 = .136 \))
Findings - FMI

- Emotional Reactivity (ER) dimension was the most predictive of Mindfulness as measured by FMI.
  
  \[(ER\text{-FMI}, t = 6.713, p < .001; R^2 = .246)\]

Findings -- TMS

- “I-Position” predicted Total Toronto Mindfulness Scale (TMS)’s score & The TMI Decentering subscale.
  
  \[(IP\text{-TMS-total, } t = 4.36, p < .001; R^2 = .121)\]
  \[(IP\text{-TMS-DeCen, } t = 2.22, p < .05; R^2 = .038)\]

- Nothing else was significantly found between the Differentiation of Self construct and the TMS mindfulness measure.

DSI Total Score

- DSI-R total score did predict total score of FMI mindfulness.
  
  \[(t = 3.77, p < .001; R^2 = .093)\]

- DSI in total was not significantly related to the total TMS in this sample.

Findings

- DSI-R was a better predictor of mindfulness as measure by the Freiburg Mindfulness Inventory (vs. Toronto Mindfulness Scale)

- Data demonstrates that as the Emotional Reactivity (ER), “I” Position (IP), and Emotional Cutoff (EC) scores increased the total FMI mindfulness scores also increased.
Findings

- Emotionality in relationships appears more associated with — The “Acceptance” dimension of mindfulness of the Freiburg Mindfulness Inventory (FMI) rather the De-centering or cognitive aspects of the TMS conceptualization of mindfulness.

Findings

- These findings confirm some relationships between level of differentiation and the measurement in the dimensions of mindfulness. This is to say that as an individual scored as less differentiated they scored with lower level of mindfulness on some measures (particularly FMI).

Findings

- What is apparent is that Mindfulness like Differentiation of Self is a multi-dimensional and complex construct.

- Research and measurement of these constructs should address and describe these complexities.

Implication of Findings

- Level of Differentiation of Self should alert the therapist to assess for the presence of affective distress and/or relationship problems.

- One of the most important services that the family counselor can provide is to evaluate whether the family and relationship experiences are associated with any symptomatology or distress.

- Family problems such as intergenerational fusion or emotional reactivity may be treated, in part, by utilizing interventions that increase mindfulness.

- Understanding of the relationship between level of differentiation and mindfulness by marriage and family counselors or family researchers could ultimately help us understand these constructs and lead to better assessment and intervention.
Suggested Future Research

- Replicate this study for additional measures of mindfulness to determine if the relationship between level of differentiation and mindfulness are consistent across different definitions of mindfulness.

- Outcome research: pre- and post- Bowenian therapy and/or mindfulness intervention. However, a longitudinal study may be the most ideal way of investigating the generalizability of Bowen’s theory of Differentiation of Self.

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