

Differentiation of Self, Life Span Theory, and Higher Stages of Human Development

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Abstract

What are the relationships among differentiation of self in Bowen theory, the object-referral/self-referral continuum of self in life-span development theory, and enduring self-states associated with peak experiences during meditation practice? Examining their interactions has practical implications: Can self-development in one system support development in others?

Thirty-seven students were administered Skowron and Friedlander's Differentiation of Self Inventory (DSI) and the Survey of Peak Experiences (SPE), measuring frequency of momentary transcendent experiences during rest and enduring peak experiences during activity and sleep.

Scores on the DSI in these subjects were similar to those in other adult populations. Between the two measures, there was a strong correlation between lower *Fusion with Others* and lower *Emotional Reactivity* on the DSI and higher peak experiences during rest and sleep on the SPE. Growth of the self-referral aspect of self, which is associated with peak experiences cultivated by transcendence, were meaningfully correlated with two subscales of differentiation of self.

Keywords

differentiation of self, meditation, transcending, Bowen family system theory

Bowen Family Systems Theory, Transcending and Higher Stages of Human Development

This paper explores the relationship between three conceptualizations of the human self: discussion of differentiation of self in Bowen family systems theory, self as it is understood in life span theory, and self as it is understood in models of higher human development, which include the study of peak experiences. Are these models independent of one another, or do they interact?

This question has practical implications. Meditation techniques that promote transcending, such as Transcendental Meditation^{®1} are reported to enhance self in individuals as it is understood within life span theory. Transcending is a state of inner wakefulness with no object of thought or perception other than awareness itself. Transcending has been shown to enhance cognitive development (Alexander et al., 2005), emotional intelligence (Valosek et al., 2018), and ego development (Chandler et al., 2005). If individuals can enhance these aspects of self through meditation, can this practice also enhance differentiation of self?

family system strongly affects the self-state and health of the individual and vice versa (Bowen, 1976). A core concept in Bowen's theory is *differentiation of self*, which can be defined as the degree to which individuals and families are able to balance two fundamental forces, the force to think with the group and the force to think for oneself. The more differentiated person can better balance intimacy and autonomy. This correlates with the integration of emotional and intellectual functioning (Bowen, 1978).

Bowen describes differentiation of self both intrapsychically (within the individual) and interpersonally (within the family). In intrapsychic terms, differentiation is the ability to distinguish thoughts from feelings, to integrate motivation by one's intellect with motivation by one's emotions (Bowen, 1976). In interpersonal terms, differentiation is the ability to experience closeness with other family members and at the same time maintain emotional objectivity with them (Bowen, 1976).

Adults high in differentiation maintain autonomy within intimate relationships and enjoy a smoother life course as a result

Differentiation of Self in Bowen Theory

Murray Bowen theorized that the human self cannot be accurately understood outside the context of nature, including the family system within which it breathes. He assumed that the

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(Skowron & Friedlander, 1998). Adults low in differentiation are reported to have higher levels of perceived stress and reduced coping abilities to stressful events (Murdock & Gore Jr, 2004). Likewise, university students low in differentiation have higher social anxiety (particularly fear of negative evaluation) and physiological symptoms (Peleg-Popko, 2002).

The Basic Self and the Functional Self. Bowen theory distinguishes between two aspects of the self, *basic self* and *functional self*. Basic self, the more fundamental of the two, does not fluctuate depending upon circumstances, including changes in relationships.

Level of self is among the most influential factors in human life, more important overall than intelligence or social status. Although circumstances play a major role in life, the variation in capacity to adapt to those circumstances is determined by level of self, and level of self in the family is itself a life circumstance.

Charles Darwin observed that “even when we are alone, how often do we think with pain and pleasure of what others think of us, or their imagined approbation or disapprobation; and this all follows from sympathy, a fundamental element of the social instincts” (Darwin, 1817, p. 112). According to Bowen theory, such fluctuations of pain and pleasure relate to functional self. For people on the lower end of the scale of differentiation, these ups and downs are steep: “Their spirits can soar with expressions of love and approval or be dashed by the lack of it” (Bowen, 1978, p. 202). Basic self, by contrast, “is not negotiable in the relationship system in that it is not changed by coercion or pressure, or to gain approval” (Bowen, 1978, p. 473).

The ancient Vedic tradition of India describes an experience like that of Bowen’s basic self: “Whether his body is cut into a thousand pieces, or he is crowned an emperor, the liberated one is liberated, even if he apparently weeps and laughs. Within himself he is neither elated nor depressed” (Swami Venkatesananda, 1993, p. 387).

Basic self is hard to change. For most people, it is fixed at an early age. Because basic self is so influential, the search for ways to grow it are important for solving relationship challenges and human problems of all types. Because Bowen theory views the family system as the evolutionary root from which mind and the self emerged, it sees the self as inextricably linked with the relationship system. Growth of basic self is the goal of the practices of Bowen theory (Bowen, 1978).

Bowen scholars often speak of change in basic self as a long-term effort, requiring years of disciplined work on managing self in the relationship system. Those who succeed in making such change are rewarded with lower levels of chronic anxiety, reduction in chronic symptoms, as well as improvements in the most important family relationships. Beyond that, the family system is improved. When one member of the family achieves a higher level of basic differentiation of self, the others benefit.

Meditation Practice and Basic Self. On February 10, 1976, Bowen wrote about Transcendental Meditation and yoga in response to a woman from a town where he had recently made a clinical presentation. Here he answers the woman’s question about working on differentiation without a coach trained in Bowen theory: “You asked what you could do on your own. There are two or three methods that go in a direction that is compatible with ‘differentiation of self,’ which is the effort to be a ‘self’ in relationship with the other, without holding the other responsible for one’s own self. One is Meditation” (quoted in Boyd, 2017). In the same letter Bowen appears to suggest that such practices might be more than merely “a supplement for the differentiating effort within a family”: “Another method that is theoretically consistent is yoga which involves a kind of physical and emotional discipline. Some people have done wonders with it. Depends more on the person” (Boyd, 2017).

It is unclear how Bowen’s thinking about meditation evolved after 1976. Bowen theorist Michael E. Kerr has suggested that meditation practice is not capable of enhancing basic differentiation of self: “Many techniques exist for better managing anxiety, but they do not change our way of thinking. That type of change depends on our ability to make more factual observations of the relationship system” (Kerr, 2019, p. 41). Kerr continues: “I am not opposed to stress reduction techniques or calming beliefs, but such techniques alone seem not to solve the chronic anxiety associated with life’s most difficult challenges, such as successful intimate relationships” (Kerr, 2019, p. 327).

Self in Life Span Theory: An Object-Referral/Self-Referral Continuum

Self is also a core concept in life span development theory, the study of individual development, or ontogenesis, from conception to death. A key assumption of this theory is that development does not cease when adulthood is reached (Alexander & Langer, 1990; Baltes et al., 2006, p. 1029). As in Bowen’s theory, self is described as a continuum of human self-states. In lifespan development, as in Bowen Theory, one’s sense of self is modeled as a fundamental organizing principle that provides context for perceptions, feelings, attitudes, and actions (Hogg, 2019). Researchers have not yet directly compared these two models of self.

In life span theory, self is mapped onto an *object-referral/self-referral continuum* (Travis et al., 2004). Experience of self varies along this continuum, individuals identifying with external objects at one end and with self at the other. To better understand this continuum of human development, we might use a movie analogy. Watching the movie of life, individuals at the object-referral end of the continuum are more lost in the movie. Emotions, thoughts, and actions are dictated by the ever-changing objects in the story. Individuals with a more developed sense of self have a different experience. Because their inner status is grounded in a self that transcends the

movie, their sense of self can be likened to the unchanging movie screen. Their experience of self is “de-embedded” from the movie of life (Travis et al., 2004). Not lost in the story, they “witness” the activity around them.

Individuals on the object-referral end of the continuum describe themselves predominantly in terms of how they interact with the world. They might say: “I tend to appreciate those things that are different, even in my style of dress. I usually like something because it’s odd or strange or something that other people would not wear.” Their sense of self is “embedded” in or identified with the processes by which they experience the world. For people at this level, “I am what I do.” Thus, their experience of existing is vulnerable to the ups and downs of their day.

Individuals in the middle of this continuum speak of themselves as de-embedded from sensory processing. Like the members in the first group, they portray themselves mainly according to how they interact with the world, but they are less embedded in it. They might say, for example: “There are many different levels to who I am. I’m a sister, a daughter, a friend, an athlete, a nature lover.” People in this middle ground describe self as directing thinking and behavior. They might say: “I’m a very confident person. I believe that I can do and accomplish anything that I set my mind to.” Their self-state is de-embedded from behavior itself, and they have a metacognitive view of their experiences. This quality of self allows them to put specific life events into a larger context (Alexander & Langer, 1990), which organizes and stabilizes their experience of life’s flux.

Individuals on the self-referral end of the continuum characterize self as de-embedded from all changing experiences—not just from sensory processing but from all processes of thinking and behavior. They appear to experience self as separate not only from *what* they are thinking or doing but even from the *process* of thinking and doing. This observing self is like the silent backdrop of the movie screen behind the noisy movie of life. They might say: “My self is independent of and underlying my changing thoughts, feelings, and actions.” This is not a dysfunctional, dissociated state. Rather, it describes a rich state of self-awareness containing an inner nature that observes life, observes the mind thinking and the body behaving. Such individuals enjoy a healthy separateness from others and are able to have a more neutral perception of all experiences (Alexander & Langer, 1990).

Abraham Maslow studied individuals at the self-referral end of the continuum in terms of what he called peak experiences, which he defined as elevating experiences that generate an advanced form of perceiving reality (Maslow, 1968). Maslow looked at momentary peak experiences that occurred spontaneously and enduring peak self-states. Other researchers are currently investigating peak self-states resulting from meditation practices.

Peak Experiences and Self-States Resulting from Meditation Practices

The word meditation is used in various ways. Meditations use different procedures, which result in different neurophysiological

effects (Travis et al., 2010; Travis & Parim, 2017). Meditation procedures can involve focus of attention, as during Buddhist Vipassana practice; being mindful of moment-by-moment experiences during mindfulness practices; or transcending during Transcendental Meditation practice. Each of these three categories is associated with a different EEG pattern (gamma, theta and parietal alpha, and frontal alpha-1, respectively) (Travis, 2019; Travis et al., 2010).

Transcending during Transcendental Meditation is the process of appreciating thoughts at finer levels. Thoughts become increasingly secondary in experience. Mental activity decreases in intensity and frequency until it ultimately ceases as inner silence, expansion, and evenness begin to dominate self-awareness (Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, 1969; Travis & Pearson, 2000).

Transcendence shares many characteristics of peak experiences, such as “moments of highest happiness and fulfillment,” (Maslow, 1968) “transcendence, wholeness, pure delight, and being beyond words” (Maslow, 1968). Transcendence is a high peak of self-referral awareness, in that self is experienced as something more fundamental than one’s changing thoughts, emotions, or behaviors. Repeated experiences of transcendence have been shown to cultivate an enduring self-referral self-state (Travis et al., 2004). Self is experienced as de-embedded from objects of experience, including other people, which lowers the degree of chronic threat they evoke. Therefore, connectedness with others increases along with enriched separateness.

We explored the relation among differentiation of self and peak experiences with a correlation study and a clinical study. The correlation study compared scores on a Survey of Peak Experiences (SPE) and Skowron and Friedlander’s Differentiation of Self Inventory (DSI)

Methods

Correlational studies are a beginning step in exploring a new area. They cannot determine causation. However, correlational studies can establish a relation between variables, the basis for future, better-controlled studies.

The null hypothesis for this study is that self-states associated with peak experiences, which transcending has been shown to cultivate, are not correlated with differentiation of self. Findings consistent with the null hypothesis would suggest that basic differentiation of self, as understood by Bowen, cannot be cultivated by Transcendental Meditation. The null hypothesis would be supported by weak correlations between the SPE and the DSI subscales. Scores of 0.3 are considered a weak correlation, 0.5 a moderate correlation, and 0.7 a strong correlation.

Subjects

Thirty-seven students at Maharishi International University participated in the study. Of these, 45% were women. The average age of the participants was 25.7 ± 5.9 years, and they had been practicing Transcendental Meditation for an average of 4.0 ± 7.0 years.

Procedure

As part of an undergraduate course on consciousness students were asked to complete two paper-and-pencil tests. They were given time in class to complete these forms.

Test Instruments

Differentiation of Self Inventory (DSI). Skowron and Friedlander factor analyzed responses of 609 adults to questions about their significant relationships and relations with their family of origin. The factor analysis yielded four factors with eigenvalues >3.0 that accounted for 26.2% of the variance and predicted lower chronic anxiety, better psychological adjustment, and greater marital satisfaction (Skowron & Friedlander, 1998). The four subscales making up the scale were *Emotional Reactivity*, *I-Position*, *Emotional Cutoff*, and *Fusion with Others*. Emotional Reactivity describes the tendency to overreact or underreact to positive and/or negative events in one's relationships; I-Position is the ability to maintain a clearly defined sense of self and thoughtfully adhere to personal convictions when pressured by others to do otherwise; Emotional Cutoff describes people who manage their unresolved emotional issues with parents, siblings, and other family members by reducing or totally cutting off emotional contact with them; and *Fusion with Others* defines the degree to which sense of self is embedded in others and actions are based on approval or disapproval by others. Fusion with Others can manifest as high conformity or rebellion (Skowron & Friedlander, 1998).

This scale has 43 statements that subjects respond to on a 6-point Likert scale. Three of the subscales, Emotional Reactivity, Emotional Cutoff, and Fusion with Others, are reverse scored, meaning that a person who responds low in Emotional Reactivity, for instance, would circle a 1, and this would be recorded as a 6. Thus, subjects who report low scores on these three subscales would score highly on overall differentiation of self. Adding the subscales together yields either a high score that indicates high differentiation or a low score that indicates low differentiation.

Survey of Peak Experiences (SPE). Over 25 years, Harung and colleagues created and refined a questionnaire based on glimpses of peak experiences in criterion-rich subject populations (Harung et al., 1996). The Survey of Peak Experiences consists of four questions derived from traditions that reflect both Eastern and Western thought:

1. *Peak experiences during waking activity.* "Have you experienced that while performing activity there was an even state of silence within you, underlying and coexisting with activity, yet untouched by activity? This could be experienced as detached witnessing even while acting with intense focus."
2. *Peak experiences during eyes closed rest.* "During practice of relaxation, meditation, prayer, or any other

technique—or when you have relaxed or had a quiet moment—have you then experienced a completely peaceful state; a state when the mind is very awake, but quiet; a state when consciousness seems to be expanded beyond the limitations of thought, beyond the limitations of time and space?"

3. *Peak experiences during sleep.* "During deep sleep, have you ever experienced a quiet, peaceful, inner wakefulness? You woke up fresh and rested, but with a sense that you had maintained a continuity of silent self-awareness during sleep?"
4. *Luck or fortunate coincidences.* "Have you experienced that your desires are fulfilled in a way that seems to be caused by coincidence or luck? You may have experienced that the circumstances arrange themselves to fulfill your desires without your direct action."

For each question, the subject indicates the frequency of that experience—ranging from "never to my knowledge" (0) to "all the time" (11). In addition, the subjects were asked to write down sample descriptions of such glimpses, using their own words.

Results

The means on the four DSI subscales were similar to those reported in the literature for an adult populations (Skowron & Friedlander, 1998). In this study, Emotional Reactivity was 3.7 ± 0.6 , I-Position was 4.4 ± 0.8 , Emotional Cutoff was 4.2 ± 0.8 , and Fusion with Others was 3.5 ± 0.8 .

Table 1 displays the correlation among the four subscales on the DSI scale and the four types of experiences on the SPE. Significant correlations ($p < .05$) are in bold for easier identification. Pearson's r is a numerical representation of the strength of the linear association between the variables. If the variables tend to go up and down together, the correlation coefficient will be positive. Pearson's r can range from -1 to 1 . An r of -1 indicates a perfect negative linear relationship between variables, an r of 0 indicates no linear relationship between variables, and an r of 1 indicates a perfect positive linear relationship between variables.

As seen in this table, the subscales of the two instruments significantly correlated with each other. Within the four responses on the SPE, peak experience during rest correlated positively with peak experience during activity and peak experience during sleep. Within the four factors on the DSI scale, Emotional Reactivity correlated with Fusion with Others and I-Position. Keep in mind that Emotional Reactivity and Fusion with Others are reverse scored, so high values of Emotional Reactivity and Fusion with Others means more differentiation—actually lower incidence of Emotional Reactivity and Fusion with Others.

Between test instruments, peak experience during rest correlated with less Fusion with Others, and peak experience during sleep correlated with less Emotional Reactivity. These data do not support the null hypothesis. Rather, they show strong correlations between three categories of the

Table 1. Correlation Matrix of Four Subscales from the Differentiation of Self Inventory and the Survey of Peak Experiences Scale.

	Fusion with others	Emo React	I-position	Emo Cutoff	Peak Exp. Rest	Peak Exp. activity	Peak Exp. Sleep
Emotional Reactivity							
Pearson r	0.489						
p-value	0.002						
I-position							
Pearson r	0.503	0.669					
p-value	0.002	<.001					
Emotional Cutoff							
Pearson r	0.236	0.300	0.478				
p-value	0.173	0.076	0.003				
Peak Exp Rest							
Pearson r	0.433	0.326	0.229	0.097			
p-value	0.008	0.052	0.179	0.580			
Peak Exp Activity							
Pearson r	0.271	0.264	0.121	0.135	0.668		
p-value	0.109	0.119	0.480	0.439	<.001		
Peak Exp Sleep							
Pearson r	0.306	0.377	0.260	0.076	0.584	0.480	
p-value	0.069	0.024	0.125	0.663	<.001	0.003	
Luck							
Pearson r	0.090	0.269	0.005	0.186	0.158	0.381	0.367
p-value	0.601	0.112	0.976	0.285	0.357	0.022	0.025

P-values less than .05 are in bold.

SPE and four subscales of DSI, suggesting that components of basic differentiation of self may be enhanced by Transcendental Meditation practice.

Discussion

These data give insight into the relationship of peak experiences and Bowen's concept of differentiation of self. We found a weak positive correlation between peak experiences and two subscales and a moderate and a strong positive correlation between peak experiences and two other subscales.

Fusion with Others and Sense of Self

Lower levels of Fusion with Others in Bowen's theory were strongly correlated with more frequent Peak experience during rest. Fusion with Others would appear to be on the object-referral end of the continuum of self, in which one's well-being, values, and decisions are shaped by the environment and by other people in the family. peak experience during rest is on the self-referral end of the continuum, in which one transcends ongoing thoughts, concepts, and individuals in the family and experiences oneself as outside of environmental change. The very high correlation between these two subscales (with higher Fusion with Others scores being reverse scored, indicating more differentiation) suggests that practicing a technique to increase peak experiences, such as Transcendental Meditation, may lead to less Fusion with Others in the family.

Emotional Reactivity and Sense of Self

The second finding was that lower levels of Emotional Reactivity were strongly correlated with more frequent peak experiences during sleep. Emotional Reactivity may correlate with the object-referral end of the continuum of self from life span development theory, in which one over- or underreacts to the ups and downs of life. Peak experiences during sleep indicate that transitory peak experiences during the day have become permanent and integrated with waking and sleeping. They have become stabilized even when conscious control is completely absent during deep sleep. An inner equanimity underlies and tempers reactivity to all experiences.

I-Positions and Sense of Self

One might expect that I-positions would also be higher with the experience of transcending. This was not the case. It might be that the DSI I-position subscale measures an interpersonal technique reflecting a behavior pattern rather than a deeper aspect of differentiation of self, including degree of identification with self versus others.

Emotional Cutoff and Sense of Self

Correlation between Emotional Cutoff and three different categories of peak experiences were very small—between 0.07 and 0.135. This indicates that some with high levels of cutoff had high levels of peak experiences and others had low levels. Likewise, some with low levels of cutoff had high levels of

peak experience while others did not. Emotional Cutoff temporarily relieves anxiety. Therefore, it could stimulate peak experiences. These data do not support that conclusion. This suggests that the self-states measured here are more than a transient state of reduced anxiety. Identifying the interaction between Emotional Cutoff and peak experiences would be an interesting area of future research.

Limitations

This is a correlational study and so we cannot assume causation. Also, we cannot rule out the possibility that a third factor affected both differentiation of self and experience of higher states of consciousness. The subjects in this study were students at a college that includes Transcendental Meditation practice in the curriculum. Future research could measure individuals who do not practice techniques intended to lead to growth of consciousness.

Conclusion

This study reports more frequent peak experiences correlated with two of the four subscales of the Differentiation of Self Inventory. A correlational study does not allow one to draw causal inferences. Rather, it is used to explore relationships among variables. If strong relationships are seen, then controlled research is warranted to test cause and effect relations. Strong relationships were seen between peak experiences that occur during Transcendental Meditation practice and differentiation of self. Experience of transcendence during Transcendental Meditation could be a useful tool for Bowen oriented therapists looking to help clients explore differentiation of a self.

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Note

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