

Differentiation of Self, Personal Adjustment, Problem Solving, and Ethnic Group Belonging Among Persons of Color

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This study focused on examining the cross-cultural validity of Bowen family systems theory (M. Bowen, 1978), namely differentiation of self for individuals of color. Ethnic minority men and women completed measures of differentiation of self, ethnic group belonging, and 3 indices of personal adjustment. Initial support for the cross-cultural utility of Bowen family systems theory was observed. Higher levels of differentiation of self predicted better psychological adjustment, social problem-solving skills, and greater ethnic group belonging among persons of color. Limitations regarding the cross-cultural utility of differentiation of self, directions for further research, and implications for counseling are discussed.

Within the field of counseling, there has been a growing interest in the theories and practice of family systems therapy (e.g., Gelso & Fretz, 1992; Schneider, Watkins, & Gelso, 1988). According to family systems theories (Bowen, 1976; Kerr & Bowen, 1988; Minuchin, 1984), individuals define themselves and function not in isolation, but rather in the context of significant relationships with family, friends, and loved ones. Likewise, systemic theories, with their emphasis on the interrelated and socially imbedded nature of individual life, provide promising conceptual frameworks for understanding individual functioning from a variety of cultures (e.g., E. Carter & McGoldrick, 1999; Gushue, 1993; McGoldrick, Giordano, & Pearce, 1996; Neville & Mobley, 2001).

Although the role of family is central, most major approaches to family systems therapy tend to overlook the implications of ethnic/cultural diversity in their theories (Nichols & Schwartz, 2000; see Minuchin, 1984; Minuchin, Montalvo, Guerney, Rosman, & Schumer, 1967, for exceptions). However, in recent decades, efforts have progressed in the field, resulting in seminal theoretical (e.g., Berg & Jaya, 1993; Boyd-Franklin, 1989; Falicov, 1998; Gushue, 1993; Hardy, 1996; Lee, 1997; McAdoo, 1988; McGoldrick et al., 1996) and empirical (e.g., Szapocznik & Kurtines, 1993) developments regarding the role of the family in diverse ethnic cultural groups. Nonetheless, examination of the cross-cultural validity of many basic constructs in family systems theories has been scarce. Consequently, counse-

lors who use a family systems framework in therapy with diverse clients will find little empirical guidance for tailoring and evaluating their approaches to conceptualizing and treating clients of color. Research is needed to evaluate the validity of family systems theories for counseling researchers and practitioners investigating and treating diverse client populations. The purpose of this study was to determine whether Bowen family systems theory (Bowen, 1976, 1978; Kerr & Bowen, 1988) was relevant for persons of color.

E. Carter and McGoldrick (1999) argued that Bowen family systems theory is a powerful theoretical framework for use among diverse cultural groups because the "increasing multiculturalism in the United States makes the work of emotional connectedness and social inclusiveness more important than ever" (p. 436). Indeed, the continuum of individualism and collectivism is considered the most salient dimension along which cultures differ (Kagitçibasi, 1996). Individualist cultures such as the United States and Western Europe tend to emphasize and respect independence, whereas collectivist cultures of Asia, Africa, Latin America, and Native American Indian societies emphasize and value interdependence (Kao & Sinha, 1997; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). In an effort to explain individual functioning from a systemic perspective, Bowen (e.g., 1978) was unique among family systems theorists in asserting that both the capacity for autonomy and emotional connection are necessary for maturity and optimal personal adjustment (E. Carter & McGoldrick, 1999; Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Bowen developed the concept of differentiation of self—thought to

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embody the dialectic between two life forces of togetherness/connection and independence/autonomy—defined as the ability to balance achieving an autonomous sense of self and maintaining close connections with important others, most notably with one's family. On an intrapersonal level, differentiation of self involves the capacity to regulate one's emotions, engage in thoughtful examination of situations, and experience comfort with one's feelings. Greater differentiation enables one to take "I" positions in relationships (i.e., to acknowledge ownership of one's thoughts and feelings and maintain an inward directedness; Tuason & Friedlander, 2000) while valuing intimacy and connection with others (Bowen, 1978). By contrast, poorly differentiated individuals are emotionally reactive—finding it difficult to remain calm in response to the emotionality of others (Bowen, 1976; Kerr & Bowen, 1988). They tend to engage in fusion with or emotional cut-off from others when under stress or experiencing overwhelming anxiety (Skowron & Friedlander, 1998). Whereas evidence exists regarding the health correlates of differentiation of self among samples of White adults, little research has been conducted to determine whether differentiation of self is linked with positive health indices among adults of color.

Some have argued (e.g., Essandoh, 1995; Rothbaum, Weisz, Pott, Miyake, & Morelli, 2000; Tamura & Lau, 1992) that the concept of differentiation of self betrays an overemphasis on Western values of independence, while neglecting to adequately attend to the importance of interrelatedness observed in collectivist cultures. Others have disagreed (e.g., Boyd-Franklin, 1989; E. Carter & McGoldrick, 1999; Guisinger & Blatt, 1994; Gushue & Sicalides, 1997), maintaining that Bowen family systems theory is one of the few personality theories that adequately elevates the role of healthy connections with others to one of central importance for maturity and health. Indeed, the primary goal of Bowen therapy is to increase differentiation of self by "grounding oneself emotionally and learning to connect emotionally by developing a personal relationship with every member of one's family" (E. Carter & McGoldrick, 1999, p. 439). Nonetheless, many behaviors characteristic of differentiation of self (e.g., taking an "I" position in relationships, developing person-to-person relationships, "detriangling") are proscribed for ethnic minorities in our society, while generally supported for White men (E. Carter & McGoldrick, 1999). As such, controversy exists as to whether the concept of differentiation of self, specifically, and the central tenets of Bowen family systems theory, more generally, are relevant for persons of color from non-Western cultures. Therefore, this study tested relations between differentiation of self, personal adjustment, and ethnic group belonging among persons of color.

DIFFERENTIATION OF SELF, ETHNICITY, AND PERSONAL ADJUSTMENT

Research conducted with samples of White European Americans has corroborated Bowen's (1978) assertions that individuals who are more differentiated enjoy better personal adjustment, fewer psychological and physical health

problems (Harvey, Curry, & Bray, 1991; Skowron & Friedlander, 1998), and are better problem solvers (Murdock & Gore, 2004). In addition, well-differentiated adults seem to cope better with stress (Skowron, Wester, & Azen, 2004) and develop healthier, more satisfying relationships with others (Kosek, 1998; Skowron, 2000). In contrast, few studies have directly examined relations between differentiation of self and personal adjustment within diverse ethnic cultural groups. One notable exception involved a study conducted in the Philippines in which Tuason and Friedlander (2000) found support for the cross-cultural applicability of Bowen theory in a sample of 306 Filipino adults. Specifically, theoretically expected links were observed between greater differentiation scores and lower anxiety and general symptomatology scores. Contrary to the authors' predictions that self-assertion in relationships would predict maladjustment in this collectivist, family-oriented culture, greater ability to take "I" positions in relationships predicted lower levels of anxiety and better adjustment, as proposed by Bowen theory. However, results of structural equation modeling found only partial support for Bowen's (1978) multigenerational transmission hypothesis, namely that similar levels of differentiation of self are present across multiple generations of a family. In another cross-cultural investigation conducted in Taiwan (Yang, 1999), family differentiation was found to predict greater self-esteem and interpersonal competence and lower depression among young adult women, and greater self-esteem among young adult men. The only cross-cultural test of Bowen theory conducted in the United States revealed no support for the relationship between differentiation of self and marital satisfaction among 32 married, acculturated Asian Americans (Murphy, 1999).

Although I found no other studies that directly examined the concept of differentiation of self in ethnic minorities, I also reviewed related studies (e.g., Giordano, Cerkovich, & DeMaris, 1993; Kenny & Perez, 1996; Lin & Fu, 1990) documenting the role of interdependence, parental support, and encouragement of autonomy in the health and well-being of ethnic minority families and their members. With respect to psychological adjustment, Kenny and Perez found that parental attachment characterized by both the experience of positive affect and sufficient support for autonomy predicted fewer psychological symptoms in African, Asian, and Latino/a American college students. Lopez, Melendez, and Rice (2000) observed that African American college students who were more anxious in their intimate adult relationships recalled that their mothers were more overprotective and their fathers indifferent and uninvolved in their lives. Likewise, secure parent-child attachment and support for identity corresponded with lower risk of delinquency among African American (Smith & Krohn, 1995) and ethnic minority late adolescents (Cernkovich & Giordano, 1987) from a low socioeconomic status (SES).

In addition, some variation has been reported across ethnic minority and White cultural groups regarding the relative balance of intimacy and autonomy among late adolescents' relations with their parents. For instance, African Ameri-

can late adolescents reported higher levels of intimacy with their parents than did their White peers (Cernkovich & Giordano, 1987). Autonomy expectations among Asian adolescents and their mothers residing in China appeared much later than did those of mother-adolescent pairs who were White (Stewart, Bond, Deeds, & Chung, 1999). Ying, Coombs, and Lee (1999) also observed that most Asian American adolescents in their sample continued to value deference and respect toward their parents over separation and individuation strivings.

Finally, although research on the role of family relatedness and autonomy on physical health status among ethnic minority groups is noticeably lacking, studies using primarily European American samples have found that persons with insecure (anxious) family attachments exhibited more negative emotionality and physical health symptoms and less frequent use of health care service than did securely attached individuals (Feeney & Ryan, 1994). Likewise, a lack of closeness with parents in early adulthood has been linked to development of, or greater proneness to, cancer (Shaffer, Duszynski, & Thomas, 1982).

DIFFERENTIATION OF SELF AND ETHNIC GROUP BELONGING

Phinney (1996) defined ethnic identity as "an enduring fundamental aspect of the self that includes a sense of membership in an ethnic group and the attitudes and feelings associated with that membership" (p. 922). Individuals who have a more positive ethnic identity have been shown to exhibit higher self-esteem (Phinney, Cantu, & Kurtz, 1997), lower stress (Quintana, Vogel, & Ybarra, 1991), and greater vocational maturity (Perron, Vondracek, Skorikov, Trembley, & Corbière, 1998) than do those reporting more negative ethnic identities. For ethnic minorities living in the United States, the process of achieving a positive ethnic identity is predicated on the experience of a sense of affirmation and belonging to one's ethnic cultural group (Cross, 1978; Phinney, 1992; Ponterotto & Pederson, 1993). Ethnic group belonging is defined as a sense of group membership and positive attitudes and feelings toward one's ethnic group (Atkinson, Morten, & Sue, 1989; Phinney, 1996). Research has shown that ethnic college students who reported greater affiliation with ethnic individuals and activities on campus during their first 6 months on campus also reported stronger ethnic identities than did their less involved counterparts (Saylor & Aries, 1999).

Highlighting parallels between Helms's racial identity development and Bowen family systems theory, Gushue and Sicalides (1997) argued that more differentiated individuals—those who are better capable of autonomous thinking and behavior and of following their own preferences, beliefs, and values—would be less likely to internalize racism and also more likely to identify more positive attitudes and a greater sense of belonging to their ethnic cultural group. Because this had not yet been empirically examined, I was interested in determining whether the ability to maintain close emotional ties with one's family and important others and

establish a solid sense of self would go hand in hand with the experience of affirmation and connection with one's larger ethnic group (Gushue & Sicalides, 1997). I hypothesized that persons of color who reported a low sense of affirmation and belonging to their self-identified ethnic group(s) would also report lower levels of differentiation of self, marked by greater emotional cutoff, less independence and fewer relationships, and greater emotional reactivity. On the other hand, individuals with a strong experience of ethnic group belonging were expected to report greater differentiation of self. Because this study focused on testing the relationship between differentiation of self and ethnic identity in a diverse sample, Phinney's (1992) Multi-Group Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM) was used. Unlike several instruments designed to measure racial identity in specific groups (e.g., Cross, 1995; Helms, 1990, 1995), the MEIM provides a common metric that enables meaningful comparisons across diverse ethnic cultural groups and was more suited to the purposes of this study.

This study examined the relationship between differentiation of self and personal adjustment among persons of color to evaluate the cross-cultural applicability of Bowen family systems theory (Bowen, 1976, 1978). Three questions were addressed. First, would the theoretical relationship between differentiation of self and personal adjustment observed in previous research among European American samples also be observed among a sample of ethnic individuals? Second, were differentiation of self levels similar among European Americans and persons of color? Third, would a positive association exist between ethnic group belonging and differentiation of self among persons of color? Initial support for the validity of Bowen theory among persons of color would emerge if (a) greater differentiation of self was associated with greater psychological adjustment, physical health, and social problem-solving skills among persons of color; (b) no differences in differentiation of self scores were observed between the current sample and a previously sampled comparison group of White, European Americans; and (c) individuals with greater feelings of ethnic group belonging also reported greater differentiation of self. Significant findings in the posited directions would suggest that differentiation of self may function in similar ways for Whites and persons of color in the United States (e.g., psychometric validity described by Helms, 1992, and Lonner, 1985). Alternately, the competing hypothesis presumed that Bowen family systems theory was culturally bound and thus posited no relationship (or a negative relationship) between differentiation of self and personal adjustment among persons of color. Support for the alternate hypothesis would be demonstrated if (a) significant differences were observed between the Differentiation of Self Inventory (DSI; Skowron & Friedlander, 1998) scores of persons of color and White participants and/or (b) DSI scores showed a null or inverse relationship with the indices of personal adjustment and ethnic group belonging among persons of color. The goal in this study was to test the role and functioning of differentiation of self among individuals from diverse ethnic minority groups in the United States. I reasoned that if differentiation of self proved

relevant to personal adjustment in a diverse sample of persons of color, then follow-up research on the cross-cultural validity of Bowen family systems theory with individuals from specific ethnic/cultural groups would be warranted.

METHOD

Participants and Procedure

A volunteer sample of persons of color was solicited to take part in a research project focusing on the “effects of stressors and general life experiences on college students’ relationships and views of self.” Prospective participants were undergraduate and graduate ethnic minority students enrolled at a large, urban university in the Midwest, identified through enrollment services. An a priori power analysis (Cohen, 1988) was conducted to determine the number of participants needed for the study. Using four predictors, holding alpha to .05, and power at .90, calculations indicated that a total of 108 participants was needed to detect a medium effect ($f^2 = .15$; Cohen, 1988), or 50 participants would be needed to detect a large effect ($f^2 = .35$; Cohen, 1988). Therefore, 150 self-identified students of color each were randomly selected and sent a questionnaire packet. Minority organizations on campus were also contacted and asked to distribute packets to their members. Participants completed the packet of questionnaires counterbalanced to minimize order effects. Each packet included a cover letter stating the purpose of the study and explaining the voluntary and anonymous nature of the research. In an attempt to bolster return rates, reminder postcards were sent approximately 2 weeks later to all individuals who had received the random surveys encouraging them to complete and return the packets and providing them with a phone number to request a replacement survey if necessary. As an incentive to participate, participants who returned completed surveys were entered into one of two raffles for cash prizes.

The final sample consisted of 61 persons of color (80.3% women and 19.7% men) attending a large, midwestern university. Participants averaged 22.17 years ($SD = 5.14$). In terms of college classification, 29.5% were freshmen, 24.6% were sophomores, 16.4% juniors, 9.8% seniors, and 19.7% were graduate students. The majority of participants were

single (49.0%) or single and in a committed relationship (42.6%). Only 8.2% were married, and 16.7% were parents. Students were self-identified as Asian American ($n = 15$, 24.6%), Native American ($n = 12$, 19.7%), African American ($n = 10$, 16.4%), Latino/Latina ($n = 9$, 14.8%), or multiethnic ($n = 15$, 24.6%; i.e., Native American and White, Latino, or African American; Asian and African American or Latino; and Latino/Latina and White). English was the primary language spoken in most participants’ homes (73.8%), followed by Hmong (9.8%), Spanish (6.6%), Mandarin (1.6%), Cantonese (1.6%), with the remaining participants (4.9%) living in other bilingual families, and 1.7% unknown. Only a third of participants (36.1%) had ever obtained counseling or therapy.

Instruments

The Differentiation of Self Inventory (DSI; Skowron & Friedlander, 1998), comprising four subscales—Emotional Reactivity (ER), “I” Position (IP), Emotional Cutoff (EC), and Fusion With Others (FO)—was used to measure the level of differentiation of self. To rate each item, the respondents use a 6-point Likert scale (1 = *not at all true* to 6 = *very true* of the respondent). Subscale scores range from 1 to 6, with higher scores reflecting less emotional reactivity, emotional cutoff, fusion with others, and greater ability to take I positions in relationships, or greater differentiation of self. Internal consistency reliabilities calculated using Cronbach’s alpha were appropriate: DSI full scale = .88, ER = .84, IP = .83, EC = .82, and FO = .74 (Skowron & Friedlander, 1998). For the current sample, alpha coefficients were ER = .83, IP = .78, EC = .86, FO = .70, and DSI full scale = .87. Construct validity is indicated by documented relations between DSI scores and less chronic anxiety, less symptomatology (Skowron & Friedlander, 1998; Skowron et al., 2004), and problem-focused coping styles (Murdock & Gore, 2004) among college students. Confirmatory factor analyses support the DSI’s multidimensional factor structure (Skowron & Friedlander, 1998). Participants’ scores in the current sample are shown in Table 1.

Three indices of personal adjustment were used. Psychological adjustment was assessed with the General Severity Index (GSI) on the Hopkins Symptom Checklist (HSCL; Derogatis, Lipman, Rickels, Uhlenhuth, & Covi, 1974), a

TABLE 1

Comparison of Differentiation of Self Inventory (DSI) Scores by Group Membership

Variable	Ethnic Minority Sample ($N = 61$)		European American Sample ($n = 61$)		<i>t</i> Value	<i>p</i> Value
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
DSI Total	3.74	.65	3.64	.52	.97	.33
Emotional Reactivity	3.29	.97	3.19	.99	.60	.55
“I” Position	4.18	.78	4.14	.79	.79	.43
Emotional Cutoff	4.57	.98	4.42	.96	.28	.78
Fusion With Others	2.76	.85	2.61	.84	.95	.34

Note. Sample of European American participants was drawn from Skowron et al. (2004). All between-group differences were nonsignificant at $p < .05$.

well-known self-report measure assessing psychological symptomatology on five dimensions: somatization, obsessive-compulsive, interpersonal sensitivity, depression, and anxiety. Items are rated on a 4-point Likert scale reflecting the degree of distress experienced within the past 7 days (1 = *not at all* and 4 = *extremely*). The GSI reflects intensity of distress independent of the number of symptoms endorsed (Derogatis, Yevzeroff, & Wittelsberger, 1975). The GSI is sensitive to symptom changes over the course of psychotherapy (Rickels et al., 1971) and is used most often to provide a summary measure of symptomatology (Derogatis et al., 1974). The GSI is computed by summing the five raw symptom subscales and dividing by 58; scores range from 1 to 4, with higher scores indicating greater symptomatology. Internal consistency reliabilities have ranged from .84 to .87, test-retest coefficients ranged from .75 to .84 (Derogatis et al., 1974), and in the current sample $r_{ic} = .95$. GSI scores in the present sample ranged from 1.05 to 3.10 ($M = 1.61$, $SD = .41$).

Physical health status was assessed using the Pennebaker (1982) Inventory of Limbic Languidness (PILL), a self-report measure assessing the frequency of occurrence of 54 common physical symptoms (e.g., heartburn, chest pain, sore muscles). Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale, from 1 = *never or almost never experienced* to 5 = *experienced more than once a week*. Scores range from 54 to 270 and are obtained by summing responses across all items, such that higher scores reflect more physical health complaints. Internal consistency reliability calculated using Cronbach's alpha ranged from .88 to .91, and acceptable test-retest reliability was documented: 2-month interval = .83 (Pennebaker, 1982) and 2-week test-retest reliability = .73 (Pennebaker, Burnam, Schaeffer, & Harper, 1977). Evidence for the construct validity of the PILL has been demonstrated by links established between PILL scores and important health indices such as greater health center use, aspirin use, external locus of control, major life changes (Pennebaker, 1982), and systolic blood pressure fluctuations (Pennebaker, Gonder-Fredrick, Stewart, Elfman, & Skelton, 1982). Internal consistency reliability of the PILL in the current sample was .93. PILL scores ranged from 68.00 to 172.00 ($M = 104.94$, $SD = 24.09$).

The Social Problem-Solving Inventory (SPSI-A; Frauenknecht & Black, 1995), a 30-item (short version) self-report instrument, was used to assess overt and covert processes used to generate solutions to problems encountered in daily living. The total SPSI-A scale comprises three subscales: Automatic Process, Problem Orientation, and Problem-Solving Skills. Respondents rate each item on a Likert-type scale, from 0 = *not at all true of me* to 4 = *extremely true of me*. Total scores were used in the current study and ranged from 0 to 4. Scores are calculated by reversing select items, summing, then dividing by the total number of items, such that higher scores indicate greater social problem-solving skills. In a validation sample, reliability estimates were calculated on the SPSI-A total scale, with a coefficient alpha of .95, and 2-week test-retest coefficient of .83 (Frauenknecht & Black, 1995). In the current sample, coefficient alpha for the SPSI-A total scale was .90, and scores ranged from 3.94 to 11.78 ($M = 8.01$,

$SD = 1.67$). Evidence for convergent-related validity was based on significant relationships between SPSI-A scores, scores on Heppner's (1988) Problem Solving Inventory ($r = .82$), and grade point average ($r = .40$) among late adolescents (Frauenknecht & Black, 1995). Likewise, lower SPSI-A scores have been associated with endorsement of more personal problems on the Personal Problem Checklist ($r = -.32$, $p < .001$) and more psychological symptoms on the Brief Symptom Inventory ($r = -.31$ to $-.33$, $ps < .001$; Frauenknecht & Black, 1995).

The MEIM (Phinney, 1992) was used to assess ethnic group belonging. The 5-item Affirmation and Belonging subscale taps positive ethnic attitudes and feelings of belonging to one's self-identified ethnic group (e.g., "I feel good about my cultural or ethnic background"). Items are rated on a 4-point Likert scale, from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 4 = *strongly agree*. After reverse scoring select items, scores are summed to compute the scale score, with higher scores reflecting greater feelings of belonging to one's ethnic group. Internal consistency reliability estimates on the scale were alpha = .82 among a sample of young adult men (Abreu, Goodyear, Campos, & Newcomb, 2000) and alpha = .72 in the current sample. Scores in this sample ranged from 1.50 to 4.00 ($M = 3.33$, $SD = .58$). With respect to the MEIM's construct validity, ethnic group belonging scores have been linked to traditional male gender roles among men from a lower SES background (Abreu et al., 2000) and higher identity scores linked with greater self-esteem (Phinney, 1992; Phinney et al., 1997) and stronger racial identity (Goodstein & Ponterotto, 1997).

Finally participants were asked to indicate on a demographic questionnaire their age; gender; race or ethnicity; college classification and major; sources of income; and parents' ages, educational levels, and occupation.

RESULTS

Cultural Validity of Differentiation of Self

First, the relationship between DSI scores and the three personal adjustment scales was examined using three multiple regression analyses. Because no hypotheses were put forth regarding the interactions among the personal adjustment scores, separate regression analyses were conducted to predict the three criterion variables (GSI, PILL, and SPSI-A) separately from the set of four DSI subscales. Multiple regression analysis was used to control for (a) experiment-wise error and (b) intercorrelations between the predictor variables (Pedhazur, 1982). Table 2 shows the intercorrelations among the DSI subscales, ethnic group belonging, and adjustment indices.

To test the relation between differentiation of self and psychological adjustment, GSI scores were regressed onto the four DSI scores (ER, IP, EC, and FO) simultaneously. A significant relationship was observed between the DSI subscales, taken together, and the GSI scores, $F(4, 52) = 8.04$, $p < .0001$, $R = .62$, $R^2 = .39$, indicating that 39% of the variability in psychological symptom scores was accounted for by participants' differentiation of self scores. Specifically, less emotional reactivity, emotional cutoff, and fusion with others and greater

TABLE 2

Intercorrelations Among Differentiation of Self Inventory (DSI) Subscales, Ethnic Group Belonging, and Adjustment Indices

Instrument	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Emotional Reactivity	—							
2. "I" Position	.42**	—						
3. Emotional Cutoff	.28*	.30*	—					
4. Fusion With Others	.54**	.03	-.09	—				
5. Multi-Group Ethnic Identity Measure	-.19	.10	.36**	-.21	—			
6. General Severity Index	-.43**	-.44**	-.54**	-.05	-.08	—		
7. Pennebaker Inventory of Limbic Languidness	-.28*	-.35**	-.22	-.02	-.003	.49**	—	
8. Social Problem-Solving Inventory	.22	.45**	.29	.05	.15	-.37**	-.28	—

Note. Higher scores on the Emotional Reactivity, "I" Position, Emotional Cutoff, and Fusion With Others DSI subscales indicate less emotional reactivity, greater ability to take the "I" position, less emotional cutoff, and less fusion with others, respectively, or greater differentiation of self. Higher Multi-Group Ethnic Identity Measure scores denote stronger feelings of ethnic belonging. Higher scores on the General Severity Index and Pennebaker Inventory of Limbic Languidness indicate greater psychological and physical symptoms, respectively. Higher Social Problem-Solving Inventory scores indicate greater social problem-solving skills.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

ability to take an "I" position in relationships were associated with better psychological adjustment. As shown in Table 3, EC scores significantly explained unique variance in GSI scores: $t(55) = 3.48$, $p < .001$, $\beta = -.42$, semipartial $r = -.44$. Thus, 44% of the variability in psychological symptoms could be understood as a function of emotional cutoff, with lower emotional cutoff associated with fewer symptoms.

A significant association was also observed between DSI subscales and SPSI-A scores, $F(4, 44) = 2.63$, $p = .05$, $R = .46$, $R^2 = .21$, indicating that 21% of the variability in social problem-solving skills could be understood as a function of differentiation of self. Better problem solving was associated with greater differentiation of self. IP scores explained unique variance in SPSI-A scores, $t(44) = 2.41$, $p = .02$, $\beta = .40$,

semipartial $r = .36$, with 36% of the variability in SPSI-A scores uniquely accounted for by IP scores. Specifically, a greater ability to take an "I" position in relationships was uniquely associated with better social problem-solving skills. Finally, contrary to our expectations, no relationship was found between DSI and PILL scores, $F(4, 52) = 1.59$, $p = .19$, $R = .34$, $R^2 = .11$, indicating no significant association between differentiation of self and physical health status in the current sample.

Second, to examine the similarity of differentiation of self levels between ethnic minorities and White participants, mean scores of ethnic minority participants on the DSI full scale and four subscales were contrasted with the DSI scores of a second sample of primarily White participants that was

TABLE 3

Multiple Regression Analysis of Differentiation of Self Subscales by Psychological Adjustment, Physical Health, and Social Problem-Solving Skills

Variable	Standardized β	tValue	p Value
Psychological adjustment ^a			
Emotional Reactivity	-.26	-1.65	.11
"I" Position	-.14	-1.11	.27
Emotional Cutoff	-.42	-3.48	.001
Fusion With Others	.04	0.28	.78
Physical health ^b			
Emotional Reactivity	-.19	-1.00	.32
"I" Position	-.14	-0.93	.36
Emotional Cutoff	-.12	-0.79	.43
Fusion With Others	.03	0.14	.89
Social problem-solving skills ^c			
Emotional Reactivity	-.17	-0.81	.42
"I" Position	.40	2.42	.02
Emotional Cutoff	.23	1.46	.15
Fusion With Others	.10	0.57	.57

Note. Italicized values represent significant unique predictors of respective personal adjustment variables.

^a $F(4, 52) = 8.04$, $p < .0001$, $R = .62$, $R^2 = .39$. ^b $F(4, 51) = 1.59$, $p = .19$, $R = .34$, $R^2 = .11$. ^c $F(4, 41) = 2.63$, $p < .05$, $R = .46$, $R^2 = .21$.

reported by Skowron et al. (2004). An equivalent-sized comparison group of European American individuals was randomly selected from Skowron et al.'s (2004) full sample that was drawn from an urban, midwestern university. The comparison group ($n = 61$) comprised 27.9% men and 72.1% women, mean = 22.07 years ($SD = 6.20$). Preliminary analyses were conducted to determine the compatibility of these two samples on key sociodemographic variables. Given the research suggesting age and gender differences on the DSI (Skowron, 2000; Skowron & Friedlander, 1998), two independent samples t tests were conducted to check for between-sample differences on age and gender. No differences emerged between the two samples on age or gender: $t(118) = .10, p = .92$ and $t(120) = 1.06, p = .29$, respectively.

To test for equivalence in differentiation of self levels across the two samples, five independent sample t tests were conducted on the DSI full scale and subscale scores (e.g., DSI-total, ER, IP, EC, and FO) by group (Ethnic vs. Anglo). As shown in Table 1, there were no significant sample differences on DSI subscale scores across this ethnic minority sample and Skowron et al.'s (2004) European American sample: t s ranged from .28 (EC) to .97 (DSI-total), p s = .78 to .33, respectively, all nonsignificant.

Ethnic Group Belonging and Differentiation of Self

Next, we tested the hypothesis that differentiation of self and ethnic group belonging covaried in our sample of persons of color. A multiple regression analysis was conducted with four predictors (ER, IP, EC, and FO) and one criterion variable (MEIM ethnic group belonging score). Results revealed that a significant proportion of the overall variance in ethnic group belonging scores was accounted for by DSI subscale scores, $F(1, 55) = 3.42, p < .02, R = .46, R^2 = .21$. Specifically, higher differentiation of self predicted higher ethnic group belonging scores. Examination of the associated beta weights showed that EC significantly explained unique variance in ethnic group belonging scores, $\beta = .43, t(55) = 3.08, p < .01$, semipartial $r = .40$, with lower emotional cutoff associated with higher belonging scores.

DISCUSSION

This study examined the cross-cultural validity of a family systems construct, differentiation of self, for persons of color. The DSI scores of the ethnic minority college students obtained in this study were moderate and comparable to those of a European American sample similar in terms of age and gender. In support of Bowen family systems theory (Bowen, 1978; Kerr & Bowen, 1988), greater differentiation of self among persons of color predicted greater psychological adjustment and social problem-solving skills. Moreover, persons of color with the greatest psychological adjustment were least emotionally cut off and more comfortable with connections to family and important others. Likewise, those who were more able to take I positions in important relationships—in other words, to engage in self-directed

behavior and acknowledge ownership of their own thoughts and feelings—reported better social problem-solving skills. Although the relationship between differentiation of self and personal adjustment was observed in a diverse sample of ethnic minority adults, these findings lend initial support to the cross-cultural relevance of Bowen family systems theory and support a growing body of literature (e.g., Campbell, Adams, & Dobson, 1984; Grotevant & Cooper, 1985; Kenny & Perez, 1996; Tuason & Friedlander, 2000) demonstrating that a capacity for self-definition and relatedness, together, is associated with health and maturity among individuals from ethnic minority cultural groups. Although preliminary in nature, these findings seem to pave the way for further research clarifying the relevance, roles, and/or functions of differentiation of self within specific ethnic minority cultural groups.

Finally, greater feelings of belonging to one's ethnic group and differentiation of self were linked in the current sample. Specifically, persons of color who reported more positive attitudes toward, and stronger ties with, their own ethnic group were less emotionally cut off in their relationships with family and significant others. These findings provide initial—albeit indirect—empirical support for Gushue and Sicalides's (1997) assertions regarding the intersection of racial-cultural identity theory (e.g., Helms, 1990) and Bowen's (1978) family systems theory. As stated by Gushue and Sicalides (1997),

the constructs of "racial identity development" and "differentiation of self" describe related processes of personality development. At the very least, a high degree of differentiation is a sine qua non for the higher racial identity statuses. (p. 135)

Although the current findings establish an empirical link between the *ethnic* identity and differentiation of self among persons of color, future research is needed to provide a direct test of Gushue and Sicalides's assertions regarding the link between *racial* identity development and differentiation of self among diverse racial/ethnic groups. Likewise, it would be interesting to determine whether LaFromboise, Coleman, and Gerton's (1993) biculturally competent individual—one who develops an internal sense of self and a strong connection with family and his or her culture of origin—would appear well-differentiated as well.

This investigation represents an initial effort to explore the cross-cultural validity of Bowen family systems theory among persons of color, and caution should be exercised when generalizing these findings. Given the modest sample size and heterogeneity of participants' ethnic/cultural group membership, these results cannot be generalized to individuals from specific ethnic/cultural groups, non-college-bound individuals, or persons residing in countries other than the United States. Rather, the cross-cultural implications of these findings should be considered preliminary and will possibly inspire further work in this area. For instance, because I could not locate a suitable measure of acculturation that could be used with individuals from different ethnic groups, I was unable to evaluate the possible impact of accultura-

tion on these findings. Future research on the relationship between differentiation and adjustment within specific ethnic minority groups should include culture-specific measures of acculturation/enculturation (e.g., African American Acculturation Scale [Klonoff & Landrine, 2000]; Suinn-Lew Asian Self-Identity Acculturation Scale [Suinn, Richard-Figueroa, Lew, & Vigil, 1987]) to discern important variations in the togetherness/autonomy balance among bicultural, traditional, or acculturated persons of color. Future investigations may build on this study by tracking acculturation levels to determine if, for example, relations between differentiation of self, personal adjustment, and ethnic group belonging exist among only those individuals more highly acculturated into the U.S. (i.e., Western) society or if they extend to those with a strong traditional and/or bicultural identification (e.g., Hall, 1992; Kich, 1992). Such work is necessary for defining the extent of and limits to generalizability of Bowen family systems theory.

Likewise, it may be that levels of cultural mistrust played a role in participants' decisions to take part in the study, whereby individuals with lower cultural mistrust elected to complete the survey, whereas those with higher cultural mistrust may have declined. Of critical importance is the question of whether or not the relations between differentiation of self, personal adjustment, and ethnic group belonging observed here would be similar for those who declined to participate. Future independent replications of these findings within specific ethnic/cultural groups are needed to provide convincing evidence for or against the applicability of Bowen family systems theory in the lives of persons of color.

This investigation, which provided initial evidence for the psychometric equivalence of differentiation of self as measured by the DSI, was conducted using a comparative, or etic, framework. To explore the conceptual and linguistic equivalence (e.g., Helms, 1992; Leong, 1997; Lonner, 1985) of differentiation of self and the DSI, additional research conducted within an emic framework (i.e., study of a culture by members within the culture) is needed. Emic research paradigms focus on studying phenomena using a within-group perspective and thus seem more capable of being used to evaluate the conceptual or linguistic validity of a construct and its operationalization through greater access to the perceptions, cognitions, and feelings of members of a single ethnic/cultural group. Qualitative methods (e.g., Jones, 1997) may be particularly amenable to determining the meanings that differentiation of self and specific DSI items hold for members of distinctive ethnic/cultural groups.

In line with research investigating factors underlying racism among White European Americans (R. T. Carter, 1990; Thompson & Carter, 1997), work is also needed to explore the relevance of Bowen family systems theory to understanding the phenomena of racism and prejudice in cross racial/ethnic relations in the United States. For instance, future investigations could examine the role of emotional reactivity in the development and maintenance of racist attitudes and behaviors (conscious and unconscious) expressed by European Americans toward persons of color. I predict that White individuals who are

less differentiated, specifically more emotionally reactive, would demonstrate more overt and/or covert racist attitudes and behaviors than would more differentiated individuals.

These results also raise several issues related to prevention of psychological disorders and retention among ethnic minority college students. Levels of differentiation of self for students who present with adjustment difficulties to university counseling centers could be assessed to identify possible emotional isolation from family and important others and/or difficulties establishing a sense of inner directedness. Because isolation, loneliness (Rotenberg & Morrison, 1993), and lack of self-assertion (Bean & Covert, 1973) have been linked to greater risk of school failure and dropout among college students, early identification of at-risk students may facilitate successful preventive interventions. For example, campus outreach programs that are designed to strengthen ethnic students' bicultural competence might be used to strengthen levels of differentiation of self and ethnic group belonging, thus decreasing feelings of isolation and enhancing positive self-definition and resulting in higher retention rates for students of color. LaFromboise et al. (1993) theorized that such interventions should include a focus on clients learning the cultural beliefs and values of their own and a second culture and developing positive attitudes about both groups, gaining confidence in their ability to relate effectively to individuals in two cultures, developing a wide role repertoire, strengthening an ability to communicate effectively with individuals from different cultures, and fostering a sense of groundedness or a social support system that extends across two cultures. Family-of-origin therapy (Framo, 1992) or reattachment therapy (Diamond & Siqueland, 1995) may also be used to assist the emotionally cut off individuals to reconnect with parents and facilitate the establishment, expansion, or strengthening of support systems within their family and on campus. Group counseling and theme-centered interactions groups that promote social engagement and provide the therapeutic experience of universality (Yalom, 1985) may also be useful in this regard. Of course, program evaluation would be necessary to determine the effectiveness of such interventions for reducing emotional cutoff and enhancing capacity for self-definition among ethnic students and, ultimately, to determine whether associated decreases in symptomatology are observed as well.

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