

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ALEXITHYMIA AND SELF-DIFFERENTIATION AMONG MARRIED INDIVIDUALS

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ABSTRACT

Self-differentiation, the capacity to maintain a stable sense of self while remaining emotionally connected to significant others, is considered a cornerstone of healthy intimate relationships within Bowen family systems theory. Because self-differentiation depends on the ability to recognize and regulate one's own emotional experience, it may be closely tied to alexithymia, a personality trait characterized by difficulty identifying, describing, and processing emotions. This study examined alexithymia as the independent variable (IV) and self-differentiation as the dependent variable (DV) among 300 married individuals recruited from Rawalpindi, Islamabad, Wah Cantt, and Taxila, Pakistan. A cross-sectional survey design was used, with alexithymia (IV) assessed via the Perth Alexithymia Questionnaire (PAQ) and self-differentiation (DV) assessed via the Differentiation of Self Inventory-Revised Short Form (DSI-R-SF). Pearson correlation results revealed a significant negative relationship between alexithymia and self-differentiation ($r = -.43, p < .01$). These findings indicate that individuals with greater difficulty identifying and describing their emotions also show a reduced capacity to balance emotional closeness with a stable sense of self. Results are discussed in relation to Bowen family systems theory and its applicability within a collectivist, Pakistani cultural context, along with clinical implications, limitations, and directions for future research.

I. INTRODUCTION

Bowen (1978) described self-differentiation as the process by which an individual identifies and separates their own thoughts, values, and beliefs from those of others while remaining emotionally attached to them. Self-identity and closeness to others represent two fundamental human motivations for intimate relationships, and an individual's capacity to balance these two motivations determines their level of self-differentiation. A highly differentiated person can be emotionally close to a partner without losing their own sense of self; they are able to remain emotionally vulnerable without becoming overwhelmed or allowing a partner's emotions to dictate their own beliefs and decisions. Even under emotional distress, highly differentiated individuals maintain clear thinking and are guided by their own values rather than by a partner's opinions. Self-differentiation is understood as a multidimensional construct. One central component is emotional reactivity, or the degree to which a person reacts emotionally to their environment and to a partner's emotional state; individuals low in emotional reactivity can remain emotionally steady when a partner is upset, whereas those high in emotional reactivity experience emotional flooding and a reduced capacity to think or respond appropriately under relational stress. Related components include a person's "I-position" (the ability to hold and express one's own beliefs and feelings), emotional cut-off (the tendency to

distance oneself to manage anxiety), and fusion with others (the tendency to lose a distinct sense of self within a relationship).

Alexithymia, first described by Sifneos (1973), is a personality trait characterized by difficulty identifying one's own feelings, difficulty describing feelings to others, a limited capacity for imaginative thought, and a tendency toward externally oriented thinking (Bagby et al., 2020). Because self-differentiation requires an individual to first recognize their own emotional experience before they can regulate it and communicate it clearly to a partner, alexithymia would logically be expected to interfere with the development of self-differentiation. People who experience emotional confusion may struggle to maintain a balance between autonomy and connection; when their own emotions feel unclear or threatening, they may become highly reactive, shut down emotionally, or fail to communicate their thoughts and feelings effectively. Although both alexithymia and self-differentiation have been extensively studied in relation to marital outcomes, comparatively less research has directly examined how these two constructs relate to one another, and even less has done so outside Western, individualistic cultural settings. Because Bowen's theory emphasizes the influence of family-of-origin patterns and cultural context on differentiation, it is important to establish whether the alexithymia–self-differentiation relationship observed in Western samples generalizes to a collectivist culture such as Pakistan, where family interdependence is high and emotional restraint is often culturally reinforced. The present study addresses this gap by examining alexithymia as the independent variable (IV) and self-differentiation as the dependent variable (DV) among married individuals in Pakistan. It was hypothesized that alexithymia (IV) would significantly and negatively predict self-differentiation (DV).

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Bowen family systems theory holds that self-differentiation develops through the capacity to distinguish one's own emotional and intellectual functioning from that of others while remaining connected to them (Bowen, 1993). A well-differentiated marriage requires that both partners be able to stay connected while remaining independent, share emotions without becoming flooded by them, hold and express a viewpoint without attacking their partner, remain engaged during conflict rather than shutting down, and support a partner without losing themselves in the process. When both partners are highly differentiated, they communicate with greater clarity, express emotion without becoming defensive, and resolve disagreements constructively (Murdock & Gore, 2004). By contrast, poor self-differentiation is associated with ineffective communication, escalating conflict due to unchecked emotional reactivity, impeded intimacy through fusion or emotional shutdown, and reduced flexibility and resilience under everyday stress (Peleg, 2008). A large body of research supports self-differentiation as one of the strongest predictors of relationship functioning across cultures. A synthesis of 47 studies found a substantial and consistent correlation between self-differentiation and relationship quality across diverse cultures and populations (Skowron & Dendy, 2004). Longitudinal work further indicates that self-differentiation assessed early in marriage predicts partner satisfaction across the relationship's course (Lampis et al., 2020), suggesting that self-differentiation does not merely reflect existing marital happiness but may actively contribute to its development. The research conducted by Khodabakhshi-Koolaei and Zarei (2022) found that people who experience alexithymia show a decreased ability to achieve self-differentiation because they develop fear of intimate relationships and form insecure emotional bonds. The results demonstrate that people who lack emotional understanding face difficulties in maintaining intimate relationships with others.

Because self-differentiation depends fundamentally on emotional self-awareness, researchers have increasingly examined its relationship to alexithymia. Scigala et al. (2021) found that individuals with alexithymia show reduced self-differentiation because they develop a fear of intimacy and form insecure emotional bonds; people who lack emotional understanding face difficulty maintaining close emotional ties while also establishing healthy personal boundaries. Karami (2014) similarly found that secure attachment combined with low alexithymia predicted more advanced self-differentiation, whereas emotional blindness paired with insecure attachment presented obstacles to psychological independence and emotional development. Consistent with these findings, Lampis et al. (2020) reported that alexithymia is a direct predictor of lower self-differentiation and also an indirect predictor via fear of intimacy and insecure attachment, with alexithymia associated with both increased attachment anxiety and avoidance both of which undermine an individual's ability to maintain a stable I-position and manage emotional

reactivity. Complementary research has examined protective factors that may support the alexithymia–self-differentiation relationship in the opposite direction. Teixeira and Pereira (2015) found that higher trait mindfulness was significantly associated with increased self-differentiation and lower alexithymia, suggesting that the capacity to accept one's internal experience without judgment may help individuals balance their need for autonomy with their need for connection. More recently, Yıldız (2020) found that individuals better able to distinguish their own thoughts and feelings from those of others (i.e., higher in self-differentiation) also reported a stronger sense of coherence, and that this relationship was intertwined with alexithymia people who could not process their emotions clearly also struggled to construct a coherent sense of meaning in their lives, which in turn was linked to lower self-differentiation.

Research examining self-differentiation and alexithymia together within couples has also pointed to a mediational chain linking the two to broader relational outcomes. Kimmes and Durtschi (2016) found that alexithymia predicts low self-differentiation, and that self-differentiation, in turn, predicts marital satisfaction, positioning self-differentiation as a key mechanism linking emotional-processing deficits to relational functioning. A study of female teachers similarly found that women with high marital satisfaction demonstrated better self-differentiation skills and lower alexithymia, indicating that emotional regulation abilities may be central to an individual's capacity for both self-differentiation and relational success (Heidari et al., 2021, as cited in prior alexithymia–marital research). Together, this literature suggests a consistent and theoretically coherent picture: alexithymia interferes with the emotional self-awareness required for healthy self-differentiation, primarily through pathways involving fear of intimacy and attachment insecurity. Cultural context may also shape how alexithymia and self-differentiation relate to one another. Bowen's theory has traditionally been developed and tested in individualistic Western contexts, where autonomy from one's family of origin is culturally normative. In collectivist cultures such as Pakistan, where family interdependence is emphasized and open emotional expression is often culturally restrained, the pathways linking emotional-processing deficits to self-differentiation may operate somewhat differently, or with different intensity, than in the Western samples from which most existing findings derive. This raises an important empirical question: does the alexithymia–self-differentiation relationship established in Western literature hold, in both direction and strength, among married individuals in a South Asian collectivist culture.

III. METHODOLOGY

A cross-sectional survey design was used to examine alexithymia as the independent variable (IV) and self-differentiation as the dependent variable (DV) among married individuals. Purposive sampling was used to collect data from participants residing in four cities in Pakistan: Rawalpindi, Islamabad, Wah Cantt, and Taxila. Study Variables. The independent variable (IV) in this study was alexithymia, operationalized as an individual's total score on the Perth Alexithymia Questionnaire, with higher scores reflecting greater difficulty identifying, describing, and processing emotions. The dependent variable (DV) was self-differentiation, operationalized as an individual's total score on the Differentiation of Self Inventory-Revised Short Form, with higher scores reflecting a greater capacity to maintain a stable sense of self while remaining emotionally connected to others.

Participants

The sample consisted of 300 married individuals (N = 300; 123 males, 41.0%; 177 females, 59.0%). Participants ranged in age from 18 to 54 years, with the largest proportion falling between 35–44 years (43.3%) and 25–34 years (38.0%). Educational attainment ranged from intermediate-level schooling to doctoral degrees (Bachelor's, 42.7%; Master's, 30.7%; intermediate, 22.3%; PhD, 4.3%). The majority of participants were married through arranged marriage (84.3%) rather than love marriage (15.7%), and marriage duration ranged from 1 to 30 years, most commonly 6–10 years (34.7%). To be eligible, individuals had to have been married for at least one year to ensure established marital interaction patterns. Individuals who were divorced, separated, or widowed, and those with a history of severe psychiatric or neurological disorders, were excluded.

Instruments

[1] Alexithymia was measured using the Perth Alexithymia Questionnaire (PAQ; Preece et al., 2018), a 24-item measure rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree) that yields subscale scores for

difficulty identifying negative feelings, difficulty identifying positive feelings, difficulty describing feelings, externally oriented thinking, and general identifying/describing difficulties. Higher scores reflect greater alexithymic traits. The PAQ has demonstrated excellent internal consistency ($\alpha = .94$; Preece et al., 2020), and in the present sample achieved a Cronbach's alpha of .94. [2] Self-differentiation was measured using the Differentiation of Self Inventory-Revised Short Form (DSI-R-SF; Drake et al., 2015). This 20-item measure assesses four dimensions: Emotional Reactivity, I-Position, Emotional Cutoff, and Fusion with Others, rated on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all true of me) to 6 (very true of me), with 15 items reverse-scored. Higher total scores represent greater self-differentiation. The DSI-R-SF has demonstrated good internal consistency ($\alpha = .87$) across general adult samples (Drake et al., 2015).

Procedure

Participants were recruited through community networks across the four target cities. Written informed consent was obtained prior to participation, and participants were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses. Clear instructions were provided for completing each scale, and participants were informed there was no time limit and that they could withdraw at any time without penalty. Following completion, participants were thanked for their contribution. The study was conducted in accordance with standard ethical guidelines for research with human participants, and approval was obtained from the relevant institutional/departmental ethics committee prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained from all participants, and confidentiality and anonymity of responses were maintained throughout.

IV. RESULTS

Prior to hypothesis testing, descriptive statistics were examined and indicated that both variables were approximately normally distributed, supporting the use of parametric statistics. A Pearson product-moment correlation was first conducted to examine the strength and direction of the relationship between alexithymia and self-differentiation.

Table 1: Pearson Bivariate Correlation Analysis of Alexithymia and Self Differentiation (N=300)

Variables	1	2
1. Perth Alexithymia	-	-.426**
2. The Differentiation of Self		-

** $P < .01$

As shown in Table 1, Consistent with the study hypothesis, alexithymia was significantly and negatively correlated with self-differentiation, $r(298) = -.426$, $p < .01$, indicating that as difficulty identifying, describing, and processing emotions increased, the ability to balance emotional connection with a stable sense of self decreased.

V. DISCUSSION

The present study examined the relationship between alexithymia and self-differentiation among 300 married individuals in Pakistan. As hypothesized, alexithymia showed a significant negative relationship with self-differentiation and regression analysis confirmed that alexithymia significantly predicted lower self-differentiation explaining 18% of its variance. These findings are consistent with prior research linking emotional-processing deficits to reduced capacity for balancing autonomy and connection (Karami, 2014; Lampis et al., 2020; Scigala et al., 2021), and provide strong support for the theoretical proposition that emotional self-awareness is a necessary foundation for healthy self-differentiation. The strength of this relationship (i.e., $r = -.426$) indicates that although alexithymia is meaningfully related to how well an individual can maintain a stable sense of self while remaining emotionally connected to a partner, it is not the sole determinant of self-differentiation. Consistent with Bowen family systems theory, family-of-origin background, past relational experiences, and cultural expectations likely also shape a person's level of self-differentiation. This is consistent with the modest but significant proportion of variance (18%) explained by alexithymia alone, suggesting that other unmeasured factors—such as attachment history, parenting

style during childhood, and broader family-systems dynamics—also contribute substantially to differentiation outcomes.

These results extend prior work by Scigala et al. (2021) and Karami (2014), who proposed that alexithymia impairs self-differentiation primarily through fear of intimacy and insecure attachment. Individuals who cannot identify or articulate their own emotional experience may struggle to engage in the kind of vulnerable, emotionally attuned closeness that self-differentiation requires, leading them either toward emotional fusion (losing their own sense of self in an effort to feel connected) or emotional cutoff (withdrawing to protect against overwhelming or confusing emotional states). Both patterns represent a failure to achieve the balance between autonomy and connection that defines healthy differentiation (Kimmes & Durtschi, 2016). The present findings also align with Yıldız (2020), whose work with a Turkish sample found that the alexithymia–self-differentiation relationship was intertwined with sense of coherence, a related construct reflecting a person’s ability to find life comprehensible and meaningful. That alexithymia was significantly related to self-differentiation in the present Pakistani sample, a markedly different cultural context from Turkey or the Western samples in which Bowen’s theory was originally developed, lends support to the idea that the emotional mechanisms underlying self-differentiation may operate similarly across cultures, even though the specific behavioral expression of differentiation (for example, norms around family closeness or emotional restraint) may vary. This cross-cultural consistency is theoretically important. Bowen’s concepts have historically been developed and validated primarily within individualistic Western contexts that emphasize autonomy from one’s family of origin. The present findings, obtained in a collectivist Pakistani sample where family interdependence is culturally emphasized and 84.3% of participants were in arranged marriages, suggest that the core emotional mechanism linking alexithymia to reduced self-differentiation is not confined to individualistic cultures. This supports the broader applicability of Bowen family systems theory beyond the cultural context in which it originated.

Clinical Implications

These findings suggest that clinicians working with couples who present with difficulties in self-differentiation such as emotional fusion, cutoff, or reactivity may benefit from also assessing for alexithymia, given the significant relationship between the two constructs. Interventions designed to build emotional identification and expression skills, such as emotion-focused therapy, may serve as a useful complement to traditional Bowenian techniques (e.g., genograms, process questions, and “I-position” statements) aimed directly at improving self-differentiation. Because alexithymia explained only a modest proportion of the variance in self-differentiation, however, clinicians should also assess other contributing factors, including family-of-origin dynamics and attachment history, rather than treating alexithymia as the sole target of intervention.

Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting these findings. Data were collected at a single time point, which precludes causal inferences regarding the direction of the relationship between alexithymia and self-differentiation; while it is plausible that alexithymia impairs the development of self-differentiation, it is equally possible that low self-differentiation contributes to difficulty processing emotion, or that both are shaped by shared developmental or attachment-related factors. Longitudinal designs with multiple assessment waves are needed to clarify the direction and stability of this relationship over time. Additionally, both constructs were assessed exclusively through self-report, leaving the findings vulnerable to common method variance and social desirability bias; future research would benefit from incorporating behavioral or observational measures of emotional reactivity and differentiation. Finally, the sample was predominantly urban (83%) and drawn from a relatively small number of Pakistani cities, which may limit generalizability to rural populations or other cultural contexts. Future research should examine potential mediators of the alexithymia–self-differentiation relationship, such as fear of intimacy and attachment insecurity, which prior research has identified as pathways through which alexithymia undermines differentiation (Lampis et al., 2020; Scigala et al., 2021). Cross-cultural comparisons with individualistic samples would also help clarify whether the strength of this relationship varies systematically with cultural emphasis on family interdependence versus individual autonomy. Finally, dyadic research examining both partners’ alexithymia and self-differentiation simultaneously would help determine whether one partner’s emotional-processing deficits affect the other partner’s capacity for differentiation.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study found a significant negative relationship between alexithymia and self-differentiation among 300 married individuals in Pakistan with alexithymia significantly predicting lower self-differentiation. These findings extend prior Western-based research into a collectivist cultural context and support the theoretical premise that emotional self-awareness is foundational to an individual's capacity to balance autonomy and connection within intimate relationships. The results underscore the value of assessing alexithymia when addressing difficulties in self-differentiation in clinical settings and highlight the need for further longitudinal and cross-cultural research into this relationship.

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