

**THE APPLICATION OF BOWEN'S FAMILY  
SYSTEM THEORY (BFST) TO THE MALAY  
POPULATION IN MALAYSIA**

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Bowen Family System Theory, Family counselling, multi-cultural counselling, Malaysia, Social problems

## ABSTRACT

The rapid economic development and social changes in Malaysia recently have led to many psychosocial problems in young people, such as drug addiction, child sexual abuse and mental illness. The Malaysian government is beginning to focus more attention on its social welfare and human service needs in order to alleviate these psychosocial problems. Although counselling is accepted and widespread in Malaysia, the practice of family therapy is not as accepted as it is still a widely held belief that family problems need to be kept within the family. However, changes are imminent and thus the theoretical basis of family therapy needs to be culturally relevant. Bowen's Family Systems Theory (BFST) is already one of the major theories taught to tertiary counselling students in Malaysian universities. The main tenet of Bowen's theory is that the family as a system may be unstable unless each member of the family is well differentiated. High differentiation levels in the family allow a person to both leave the family's boundaries in search of uniqueness and to continually return to the family fold in order to establish a more mature sense of belonging. The difficulty, however, is that while Bowen has claimed that his theory is universal nearly all of the research confirming the theory has been conducted in the United States of America. The only known study outside America, however, did show that Bowen's theory applied to a Filipino population but, one of the theory's propositions that differentiation is intergenerational was not supported in this non-American sample. The American sample that was compared to the Malay sample was taken from Skowron and Friedlander's (1998) study. One hundred and twenty-seven faculty staff in an American university completed the Differentiation of Self Inventory (DSI) to measure level of differentiation of self. This thesis therefore, set

out to determine whether Bowen's theory applied to another non-American sample, the Malaysian community. The research also investigated if the intergenerational effect was present in the Malaysian sample as well as explored the role of socio-economic status on Bowen's theory of differentiation and gender effect. Three hundred and seventy-four families completed four measures to examine these research questions: the Differentiation of Self Inventory (DSI), the Family Inventory of Life Event (FILE), the Depression Anxiety and Stress Scale (DASS) and the Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale (CD-RISC). The results of the study showed that differentiation of self is a valid construct for the Malay population. However, all four subscales of the Differentiation of Self Inventory (DSI); emotional reactivity (ER), emotional cut-off (EC), fusion with other (FO) and I position (IP), showed significant differences compared to the American sample from Skowron and Friedlander's (1998) study. The Malay sample scored higher in emotional reaction (ER), fusion with other (FO), but lower on emotional cut-off (EC) and I position (IP) than the American sample. The intergenerational effect was found in the Malay population as the parent's level of differentiation correlated with their children's level of differentiation. It was found that stress as measured by the Family Inventory of Life Event (FILE) and as measured by the Depression Anxiety and Stress Scale (DASS) were not correlated with the level of differentiation of self in parents. However, gender had a significant effect in predicting the level of differentiation among parents in Malay population with females scores higher on emotional reactivity (ER) and fusion with other (FO) than males. An additional finding was that resilience can be predicted from the level of differentiation of self in children in the Malay sample. There was also a positive correlation between the level of differentiation of self in parents and resilience in their children. Findings from this

study indicate that the concept of differentiation of self is applicable to a Malay sample; however, the implementation of the theory should be applied with cultural sensitivity.