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SELF -DIFFERENTIATION AND INTERPERSONAL DEPENDENCY AT RUSSIAN AND VIETNAMESE YOUNG PERSONS

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Abstract

M. Bowen's concept of self-differentiation describes the capacity of a person to achieve emotional maturity and to create a reliable connection with others. The fact that it was developed on the basis of the values of individualism and independence let us suppose that collectivist cultures may have some specific mechanisms of secure attachment providing. Very little empirical research has examined it from a cross-cultural perspective. The comparative analyses of self-differentiation and its intercorrelations with interpersonal dependency at Russian and Vietnamese young persons were performed. The participants of the study were 101 Vietnamese and 86 Russians of 19 -28 years old. Methods: Interpersonal Dependency Inventory (Hirschfeld et al.), Relationship Profile Test (R. Bornstein), Differentiation of Self Inventory (E. Skowron et al.); Mann-Whitney U-test, Exploratory factor analysis. It was revealed that while the overall level of self-differentiation and most of its indicators are higher among Vietnamese, Russians show a higher ability to recognize their needs in interpersonal relationships (have stronger I-position). Factor analysis shows that Vietnamese self-differentiation is built on emotional regulation and positive attitude to interpersonal dependency. For Russians, the central element of self-differentiation is strong I-position in combination with the low tendency for destructive over-dependence and with the desire for autonomy, combined with a tendency to an emotional cut-off.

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Keywords: Cross-cultural differences, emotional dependency, intimate relationship, romantic relationship, self-differentiation differences.



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1. Introduction

1.1. The concept of self-differentiation and its association with couple relationships

M. Bowen's theory of emotional systems is one of the most comprehensive explanations of the systemic and transgenerational factors that affect the person's ability to build constructive intimate relationships (as cited in Nichols & Schwartz, 1998). The key concept of Bowen's theory is self-differentiation. It is characterized by a combination of intrapsychic characteristics and interpersonal interaction. Intrapsychic properties reflect the ability of a person to distinguish his or her inner emotional and rational systems and the degree of self-regulation of psychical functioning, relying on one or another system. Interpersonal interaction describes the ability to develop close, emotional relationships with others while maintaining own autonomy within them (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). The later studies distinguished the main dimensions of self-differentiation. Intrapsychic measures include emotional reactivity, difficulty in taking I-positions; interpersonal measures include a tendency to emotional cutoff, and fusion with others (Ross et al., 2016).

In recent years a great deal of theoretical, clinical, and empirical research has been devoted to the concept of self-differentiation. In general, these studies have confirmed that highly differentiated persons show higher psychological well-being (e.g. Skowron et al., 2003). There is some scientific evidence of the importance of qualities related to self-differentiation for quality of family relationships and marital satisfaction and adjustment (e.g. Lampis, 2016). It was proved that the level of self-differentiation of each spouse in a couple is fundamental to his / her ability to achieve intimacy and reciprocity in marriage (Gubbins et al., 2010). The interrelation between self-differentiation and adult attachment was revealed. It has been shown that a higher level of self-differentiation is associated with more secure attachment (Timm & Keiley, 2011), lower levels of anxiety, and avoidance of attachment (e.g. Thorberg & Lyvers, 2006). Some studies also revealed the correlation of low-level self-differentiation with high levels of codependency (e.g. Chang, 2016).

1.2. Cross-cultural applicability of Bowen's theory

Some researchers have questioned the positive influence of self-differentiation on psychological well-being in collectivistic cultures (Lee, 1998). For example, Slote (1992) and Tang (1992) showed that in traditional Confucian societies children have a greater sense of psychological security when they obey their parents and depend on them. On the other hand, Tuason and Friedlander (2000) tested the cross-cultural applicability of Bowen's theory and reported a significant influence of self-differentiation on psychological well-being and anxiety in the Philippines, similar to the results from the USA samples. Işık and Bulduk (2015) verified the model for the Turkish population, Lam and Chan-So (2013) – for Chinese ones. Some cross-cultural studies have shown relative cultural independence of self-differentiation, but with differences in measurements of fusion with others in collectivist and individualistic cultures (e.g. Lampis, 2016).

2. Problem Statement

In general, a review of cross-cultural studies of self-differentiation proves the need for research of self-differentiation with multicultural samples in order to verify the universality of Bowen's theory (Miller et al., 2004). The results of the studies of self-differentiation based on the Russian population also basically support Bowen's theory. For example, the comparative analysis of the self-differentiation of adult persons with different attachment styles revealed significant differences between them in all measurements of differentiation. The results also reflect some cultural specifics. A reliable attachment style was characterized by the acceptance of one's own I-position and the lowest tendency for emotional cutoffs, as well as an average level of emotional reactivity and fusion with others. The highest overall level of differentiation was found in a dismissing style people, the lowest level – in preoccupied (dependent) style (Chebotareva et al., 2018).

For a more subtle understanding of the mechanisms of interaction of self-differentiation with the characteristics of close relationships, it was decided to conduct a comparative intercultural study between Russian and another - not Western culture. For this study, Vietnam was chosen as a culture that is considered to be collectivist, but quite unique, combining the traditions of three main Eastern religions: Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism.

According to Hofstede's research (as cited in Hofstede & Minkov, 2010), Russian culture occupies an intermediate place in the dimension of collectivism - individualism. The distinctive features of this culture, important for understanding its specifics in self-differentiation functioning, are high rates of power distance and avoiding uncertainty, which, presumably, can reduce the possibility of differentiation.

Vietnamese culture, compared to Russian, is considered more collectivist. In Russian social (clan) values are considered in this culture to be more important than family values. That is in Russia, traditionally, much attention is paid to the inner world of a person, while the "impersonality" is considered to be a distinctive feature of Vietnamese culture (Phạm Minh Anh, 2012). According to Vietnamese researchers, respect for other people, optimism, tact, and ability to cope with their feelings, without causing any discomfort to other people (Huỳnh Văn Sơn, 2009), can presumably provide a high level of emotional self-regulation and a low tendency of fusion with others.

Both countries, Russia and Vietnam, have experienced radical changes in the socio-economic regimes, entailing a restructuring of value systems, changes in patterns of relationships in families, in their personal lives. That also makes relevant the study of the self - differentiation of young generations in these two cultures.

3. Research Questions

Research Question 1: Do people from a more collectivist Vietnamese culture have a lower level of self-differentiation and interpersonal dependency than people from a relatively less collectivist Russian culture?

Research Question 2: Does the character of the relationship between self-differentiation and interpersonal dependency differ between people belonging to Russian and Vietnamese cultures?

4. Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of the research was to identify cross-cultural specifics of self-differentiation and interpersonal dependency at Russian and Vietnamese young persons.

5. Research Methods

5.1. Methods

The empirical research of the study was conducted using the following methods. “The Differentiation of Self Inventory” (DSI-R) (Skowron & Friedlander, 1998) (in adaptation of Chebotareva et al., 2018) was applied to study the level of self-differentiation. Additionally, two methods were used to diagnose interpersonal dependence: “Interpersonal Dependency Inventory” (Hirschfeld et al., 1977), adapted by Makushina (2006) and “Relationships Profile Test (R. Bornstein & S. Huprich, 2006), adapted by Makushina (2006).

5.2. Participants

The participants of the study were 187 students of Moscow universities: 101 Vietnamese (49 men, 52 women) and 86 Russians (40 men and 46 women). Russian participants' age was from 21 to 28 years old ($M = 24,1$); Vietnamese participants' age was from 19 to 28 years old ($M = 23,6$). All respondents at the time of the study were in a romantic relationship from 0.5 to 5 years (for both groups $M=2,9$), not married. For all participants Moscow was not their hometown; everyone lived in their universities' dormitories. All Vietnamese students spoke Russian, studied at universities in Russian. They were interviewed by the Vietnamese psychologist - postgraduate students. All the participants were recruited into the study voluntarily at student international cultural centres.

The protocol of the study was approved by the Committee on publication ethics (COPE) of Peoples' Friendship University of Russia (RUDN) (Project identification code – 050422-0-027).

6. Findings

6.1. Self-differentiation of Russian and Vietnam young people

In Table 01 the results of a comparative analysis of the level of self- differentiation among Russian and Vietnamese students are presented. Also, for comparison with the data obtained by other researchers, for comparison, data on the level of self- differentiation on the American sample obtained by Skowron and Friedlander (1998) during the method testing.

Table 01. Differences in the levels of self-differentiation of Russian and Vietnamese

Variables of self - differentiation	American** M (SD)	Russian (n=86) M (SD)	Vietnamese (n=101) M (SD)	Rank Sum (R)	Rank Sum (A)	U	p
Emotional reactivity	3.37 (.94)	3,06 (.70)	3,89 (.70)	5345,00	12233,00	1604,00	0,00000
I Position	4.08 (.85)	3,77 (.87)	3,24 (.66)	9739,00	7839,00	2688,00	0,00001
Emotional cutoff	4.53 (.79)	4,03 (.78)	4,54 (.68)	6507,00	11071,00	2766,00	0,00002
Fusion with others	2.92 (.85)	2,92 (.65)	3,76 (.64)	5272,00	12306,00	1531,00	0,00000
Total self-differentiation	3.74 (.60)	3,45 (.29)	3,86 (.67)	5801,00	11777,00	2060,00	0,00000

Notes: *Higher scores on all scales represent greater self-differentiation.

**according to Skowron and Friedlander (1998, p. 239)

As we can see from Table 01, the indicators of the overall level of self-differentiation and its different aspects in Russian and Vietnamese students are in the range of normative values obtained in the American sample. However, the indicator “I position” of Vietnamese students is at the lower limit of the normative values, and the indicator “Fusion with others” is at the upper limit.

The Mann-Whitney criterion revealed statistically significant differences at a high level of significance for all variables of self- differentiation. In general, the overall level of differentiation of Russian students is significantly lower than that of Vietnamese students. Also, the Vietnamese showed a higher level of self-regulation of emotions, a lower desire to fuse with others and an emotional cutoff. Russian students are superior to the Vietnamese only at the level of I - position. Thus, Russian young people, more than Vietnamese tend to adhere to their convictions, rely on themselves. However, it is much more difficult for them than for the Vietnamese to distinguish their thoughts and emotions, not to give in to in stressful situations. Also, if difficulty arises in close relationships, Russians, to a greater extent than the Vietnamese, are prone to either emotional cutoffs or emotional fusion with others.

6.2. Emotional dependency of Russians and Vietnamese

For a more detailed study of the manifestations of differentiation in close relationships, we also conducted a comparative analysis of the level of emotional dependency of Russian and Vietnamese students (see Table 02).

Table 02. Differences in the emotional dependency of Russian and Vietnamese

Variables of dependency	Russian (n=86) M (SD)	Vietnamese (n=101) M (SD)	Rank Sum (R)	Rank Sum (A)	U	p
Emotional reliance on another person (E)	48,79 (8.5)	36,40 (5.9)	11390,00	6188,00	1037,00	0,00000
Lack of social self confidence (C)	35,88 (6.0)	31,47 (4.2)	10105,00	7473,00	2322,00	0,00000
Assertion of Autonomy (A)	29,33 (6.1)	26,87 (4.3)	9412,00	8166,00	3015,00	0,00032

Dependency Total (D) (D= E+C-A)	55,35 (17.1)	41,00 (4.8)	10674,00	6904,00	1753,00	0,00000
Destructive overdependency	30,60 (8.4)	23,57 (6.3)	10390,00	7188,00	2037,00	0,00000
Dysfunctional detachment	32,00 (5.5)	27,40 (5.6)	9948,00	7630,00	2479,00	0,00000
Healthy dependency	34,26 (5.8)	29,43 (7.2)	9605,00	7973,00	2822,00	0,00004

As we can see from table 02, the levels of emotional dependency among Russian students in all variables are much higher than that of Vietnamese. It is important to note that they have higher both functional (healthy) and dysfunctional dependency. Russian young people are generally more prone to emotional dependence on their partner; they are less self-confident in terms of social interaction, more likely to rely on others, less eager for autonomy. In stressful situations in a relationship, they are more likely than Vietnamese to distance themselves from a partner. Thus, the data of the comparative analysis of emotional dependency confirm the results of the comparison of the levels of differentiation in the representatives of two cultures under discussion.

6.3. Interrelations between self-differentiation and dependency among young Russians and Vietnamese

In order to understand the relationship between different aspects of self-differentiation and dependency, exploratory factor analysis was carried out using the principal component method with Varimax rotation (Table 03).

Table 03. Differences in the levels of self-differentiation of Russian and Vietnamese

Variables: self-differentiation & dependency	Russian			Vietnamese		
	F1	F2	F3	F1	F2	F3
Emotional reliance on another person	0,313	0,075	-0,849	0,862	-0,260	0,045
Lack of social self confidence	0,744	0,153	-0,285	0,831	-0,047	-0,070
Assertion of autonomy	-0,280	0,811	0,126	0,851	0,198	-0,351
Destructive overdependency overdependent	0,827	-0,066	-0,333	0,915	0,205	-0,182
Dysfunctional detachment detachment	0,051	0,817	0,148	0,454	0,275	-0,661
Healthy dependency	-0,825	-0,104	-0,066	-0,414	-0,202	0,644
Emotional reactivity*	-0,319	-0,065	0,777	-0,946	0,089	0,016
I Position*	-0,852	0,245	0,115	-0,094	-0,929	0,173
Emotional cutoff*	-0,198	-0,813	0,292	-0,589	0,684	0,198
Fusion with others*	0,097	0,185	0,810	0,327	0,199	0,873
Expl.Var	2,974	2,129	2,315	4,727	1,645	1,847
Prp.Totl	0,297	0,213	0,231	0,473	0,165	0,185
Cumulative	37,472	58,749	74,173	49,934	68,839	82,197

Notes: *Higher scores on the scales represent greater self-differentiation.

In both groups, optimal factor structures were obtained for three factors. For Russian students, the central factor is the factor of destructive over-dependency, which is directly related to lack of social self-confidence, and inversely - with healthy dependency and a strong I-position. The second factor in the Russian sample is the factor of dysfunctional detachment, which is directly related to the assertion of autonomy and inversely - with a low tendency towards an emotional cutoff. That is, it seems that for Russian young people detachment is perceived as a manifestation of autonomy. The third factor in the Russian sample is presented by a low level of desire to fuse with others, directly related to low emotional reactivity and inversely - with a tendency to rely on others. It is possible that Russians also rely on others for help in regulating their own emotions.

For Vietnamese students, the central factor was also the factor of destructive over-dependency, but in this group, this indicator is directly related to all other indicators of dependency, except healthy one, and also – inversely to emotional reactivity. The second factor in Vietnamese students is formed by I – position variable, which is inversely related to the tendency towards emotional cutoffs. The third factor in the Vietnamese sample, as well as in the Russian one, is formed by a low desire to fuse with others, but in this case it is directly related to healthy dependency and inversely - with dysfunctional detachment, i.e., apparently, this factor manifests the overall ability of Vietnamese to maintain constructive intimate relationships without fusion or distancing from a partner in stressful situations.

Thus, factor analysis showed that Russians and Vietnamese differ not only in the level of self-differentiation but also in the structure of this quality. For Russian students, the central component of the self-differentiation, which determines dependence in close relationships, is the strong I -position, and for Vietnamese, it is the ability to regulate their emotions. The patterns of behavior in stressful situations in close relationships are also determined by different mechanisms in these two groups. For Russian young people, distancing in relationships and an emotional cutoff are more associated with manifestations of personal autonomy, and may be considered by them as constructive strategies, and for Vietnamese, these patterns are associated with strong I-position. For Russians, the desire to fuse with others is associated with the desire to rely on others, including for the regulation of emotions, and for the Vietnamese - with a low ability to maintain healthy dependence, and apparently is regarded as just as non-constructive a strategy as distancing.

Healthy addiction in both groups is also associated with different parameters: for Russians, this is the absence of overdependency, strong self-attitude, and self-confidence, and for the Vietnamese it is the ability to maintain constructive relationships, avoiding both excessive distancing and emotional fusion.

7. Conclusion

The finding of the research not entirely consistent with the widespread belief that in collectivist, especially in Asian, cultures, intrapersonal processes are more mediated by interpersonal relationships and shared goals (Trommsdorff, 2012). On the one hand, the high level of self-differentiation of Vietnamese students can be explained by the fact that the sample consists of students studying abroad. Bowen admitted that a basic level of differentiation could change through “unusual life experiences or a structured effort” (as cited in Kerr & Bowen, 1988, p. 98). Roytburd and Friedlander (2008) suppose that immigration can be

such an unusual experience. On the other hand, it is possible that the results obtained reflect the real cultural specifics of differentiation of students from different cultures.

Generally, the findings let us conclude that M. Bowen's conception of self-differentiation generally could be applied to different collectivists cultures consistently with the theoretical background. However, representatives of different cultures might experience their emotions and close relationships with significant others differently from those belonging to the representatives of American society and other individualistic cultures that can contribute to the variation across subscales. The current study revealed that Vietnamese students, in comparison with Russians, have a higher overall level of differentiation of self. Russians have higher I-position strength. Vietnamese can regulate their emotions better than Russians - in interpersonal stress they less often disengage from others or merge their thoughts and feelings with those surrounding them.

For Russian students, the central component of the self-differentiation, which determines dependence in close relationships, is the strong I -position, and for Vietnamese, it is the ability to regulate their emotions. The patterns of behaviour in stressful situations in close relationships are also determined by different mechanisms in these two groups. The study findings partly support the idea that in more collectivist, cultures intrapersonal processes are more mediated by interpersonal relationships and common goals. In Russian culture, which is a transitional type of culture between individualistic and collectivist, differentiation of self is mostly based on intrapersonal rational processes.

The results of the present study can be implemented into psychotherapeutic practice. While working with differentiation of self, it would be helpful to take into account the cultural background of the clients. As self-differentiation of representatives of different cultures has a different structure, to increase the effectiveness of psychological assistance, therapeutic strategies should be adapted to cultural traditions of interpersonal and interpersonal emotional processes.

This study also has several limitations and related prospects for further investigation of this problem. Among main of them are involving only young participants, especially, Vietnamese students studying abroad. The limitation in volume does not allow us to discuss the variability of the studied properties depending on socio-demographic characteristics in this paper. It also seems to us promising to study cross-cultural differences in the interrelation of self-differentiation and attachment styles, the role of self-differentiation in intercultural couple's relationship.

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