



Social anxiety and differentiation of self: A comparison of Jewish and Arab college students



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 13 February 2014
Received in revised form 23 April 2014
Accepted 28 April 2014
Available online 27 May 2014

Keywords:

Social anxiety
Differentiation of self
Jews
Arabs
Christians
Muslims
Druze

ABSTRACT

This study examined the relationship between differentiation of self and social anxiety, comparing young Jewish and Arab college students in Israel and looking at gender differences. The sample consisted of 300 college students: 127 Jews and 173 Arabs (107 Muslims, 43 Christians and 23 Druze). Of these, 175 were males and 123 females, while 2 did not specify their gender. Results indicated that Jews reported higher levels of I-position and lower levels of emotional cutoff than Arabs. Females reported higher levels of emotional reactivity and fusion with others than males. On the whole, results lend support to the universality of Family Systems Theory and point to the importance of examining differentiation of self when trying to decrease social anxiety.

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1. Introduction

Recent years have witnessed increased interest in research on Family Systems Theory and its implementation (Bowen, 1978; Kerr & Bowen, 1988). According to the theory, the human family is a multigenerational emotional system that influences the functioning and anxiety of the individual. One of the most important patterns that is transmitted from generation to generation is differentiation of self. A series of studies has found differentiation of self to be associated with anxiety and well-being (e.g., Skowron & Friedlander, 1998; Skowron, Stanley, & Shapiro, 2009). Specifically, social anxiety was found to be influenced by differentiation of self and transferred multigenerationally (Peleg, 2005).

Most of the research was carried out among participants from individualist societies (e.g., Jankowski & Hooper, 2012; Skowron & Dendy, 2004; Skowron et al., 2009), while only a few have examined these patterns within collectivist societies (e.g., LeFebvre & Franke, 2013; Peleg & Rahal, 2012). Thus far, no research has investigated the relationship between differentiation of self and social anxiety and differentiation of self comparing members of an individualist society with those of a collectivist society. The aim of the present research is to examine cross-cultural differences in

these variables among Jewish and Arab (Muslim, Druze and Christian) college students living in Israel, with the former representing an individualist society and the latter representing a collectivist one.

1.1. Differentiation of self

Differentiation of self is the ability of individuals to create a balance between intimacy and autonomy in their relations with significant others, as well as between their intellectual and emotional levels, when coping with anxiety- and stress-producing situations. Kerr and Bowen (1988) argued that individuals with high levels of differentiation of self tend to cope more effectively in various situations, while those with low levels of differentiation of self experience higher levels of chronic anxiety, function less effectively in stressful situations, and therefore suffer more from psychological and physiological symptoms.

According to Bowen, four factors are indicators of a person's level of differentiation of self: emotional reactivity, the ability to take an I-position, emotional cutoff and fusion with others. Emotional reactivity taps a person's tendency to react to stress by irrational emotional flooding. I-position describes one's ability to stand up for oneself and independently express one's will. Emotional cutoff taps one's tendency to isolate oneself and cut off relations as a way of dealing with tension and symbiotic relationships. Finally, fusion with others reflects the tendency to create dependent relationships with significant others.

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Differentiation of self has been the focus of a great deal of theoretical research and has been clinically implemented extensively. A series of studies have examined the relationship between it and mental and physical health. Findings from recent studies reveal positive correlations between differentiation of self and psychological well-being (Skowron et al., 2009), marital satisfaction (Peleg & Yitzhak, 2010) and marital adjustment (Skowron, 2000). Negative correlations were found between differentiation of self and trait anxiety (Skowron & Friedlander, 1998), separation anxiety (Peleg, Halaby, & Whaby, 2006; Peleg & Yitzhak, 2010), symptoms of depression (Elieson & Rubin, 2001) and social anxiety (Peleg, 2002, 2004).

1.2. Social anxiety

Social anxiety, also known as social phobia, is defined as anxiety characterized by fear of social situations in which the individual is exposed to unfamiliar people and is afraid she/he will suddenly show signs of anxiety and be humiliated or embarrassed. Exposure to social situations dreaded by the individual frequently causes panic attacks (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). It was not until 1980, in the third edition of the DSM, that social anxiety was classified as a psychological disorder and included as a separate category. It is defined there as constant fear of situations in which the individual is examined and evaluated by others and expects that his or her behavior will cause embarrassment and humiliation. In 1994, two types of social anxiety were added: generalized social phobia and specific social phobia. Specific social phobia refers to fear of one or two social situations – for example, public speaking or eating in public. In comparison, generalized social phobia is diagnosed when an individual fears many types of social situations.

The links between social anxiety and family variables have been reported by several researchers. One study indicated that social anxiety is related to attachment and parenting patterns (Higa, Fernandez, Nakamura, Chorpita, & Daleiden, 2006). Another supported the finding that social anxiety is related to family patterns and is transmitted from parents to offspring in a multigenerational transmission process (Bartle-Haring & Gavazzi, 1996). An Israeli study (Peleg-Popko & Dar, 2001) found children's social anxiety to be positively related to family cohesion and inversely related to marital quality. It was suggested that intensive closeness creates over-protection, and that the dynamics of fused families, which are characterized by emotional dependence and lack of autonomy, may induce a sense of confusion, stress and anxiety in the child. Indeed, another study conducted in Israel (Peleg, 2002) found a negative relation between social anxiety (particularly fear of negative evaluation) and physiological symptoms (e.g., headaches, stomach aches), on the one hand, and family differentiation, on the other. Results suggested that less differentiated individuals may be at risk of higher levels of social anxiety and symptomatology.

Another study carried out in Israel found a negative correlation between social anxiety and differentiation of self (Peleg, 2005). The study tested the relationships between parents' differentiation of self and offspring's social anxiety, using a sample of university students and their parents to reflect family patterns across three generations. The main finding confirmed that parents' levels of social anxiety and differentiation (differentiation of self and family differentiation) were positively related to those of their offspring. Moreover, students' social anxiety was inversely related to their parents' levels of differentiation. Specifically, differentiation of self was found to especially correlate with fear of negative evaluation. The research supported Bowen's argument regarding multigenerational transmission (Kerr & Bowen, 1988), inasmuch as it found that both social anxiety and differentiation of self are transferred from one generation to another.

1.3. Cross-cultural research

Studies examining the relationship between differentiation of self and mental health have largely been carried out among participants from Western societies; only a few have examined this relationship among participants from Eastern-collectivist societies. Some studies found that participants from collectivist societies reported lower levels of differentiation of self and higher levels of psychological distress in comparison to participants from individualist societies (e.g., Hornsey, Jetten, McAuliffe, & Hogg, 2006; Tuason & Friedlander, 2000).

A study that examined differences between Korean college students and American students of European origin regarding the relationships between differentiation of self, self-esteem and symptoms of depression found the ability to take I-positions to be the strongest predictor of self-esteem and symptoms of depression in both groups, supporting previous research pointing to higher levels of I-position among participants from collectivist societies (Peleg & Rahal, 2012; Peleg et al., 2006; Tuason & Friedlander, 2000). However, the relationship between the level of differentiation of self and psychological well-being among American students was stronger than that found among Korean participants. The researchers concluded that, even though differentiation of self is more valued in individualist societies, it can serve as a significant construct for understanding psychological adjustment in both ethnic groups (Chung & Gale, 2009).

In a series of recent studies carried out among Jewish and Arab college students in Israel, several cross-cultural differences were found in levels of differentiation of self. For example, Arab participants reported a higher level of I-position than their Jewish counterparts (Biadessa-Ashkar & Peleg, 2013; Peleg & Rahal, 2012; Peleg et al., 2006). Furthermore, while no significant differences were found in the total score of differentiation of self between Druze and Jewish mothers, the I-position and fusion with others subscales were higher among the former (Peleg et al., 2006). Another recent study in Israel (Peleg & Rahal, 2012) examined differences in levels of differentiation of self and their relationship to physiological symptoms among Jews and Arabs living in Israel. Results pointed to a negative correlation between differentiation of self and physiological symptoms, with the correlation stronger among Jews. Strong predictors of physiological symptoms were the emotional reactivity dimension among Jewish and Arab women and the emotional cutoff dimension among Jewish men. In addition, a significant interactional effect was found: there was a wide gap between Jewish women and men in their levels of emotional reactivity, while similar levels were found among Arab women and men. Among Arab men, no factors were found to significantly contribute to the level of physiological symptoms. The study concluded that the level of differentiation of self is important in all societies and is related to the physical and mental functioning of the individual; however, its relation to physiological symptoms is more salient in individualist societies than in collectivist ones.

Differences between ethnic groups may also affect their ability to cope with anxiety. Studies have shown that people from collectivist backgrounds are more likely to report higher levels of anxiety and depression (Dwairy, 1997, 2002). Moreover, being a collectivist minority group, Arab families in Israel often bond closely, and children tend to report higher levels of worry, anxiety and somatic symptoms (e.g., Peleg & Rahal, 2012; Peleg et al., 2006).

The present study thus examines the differences between Jewish and Arab college students in Israel in terms of their levels of social anxiety and differentiation of self, as well as the magnitude of the correlation between these two variables in each group. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to investigate these variables among two ethnic groups living in the same country.

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