



The Effectiveness of Bownian Group Couple Therapy on Couples' Self-differentiation

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Abstract

This research was a quasi-experimental design with experimental and control groups and through pre-post and follow-up-tests. The sampling method was in convenience and the Sample size was 30 couples. The couples of each group were screened out by General Health questionnaire (GHQ -28); those whose scores were below cut-off point of 23 in totals and beneath 14 in each subscales were divided into two Experimental and control groups by means of random replacement method. The tools were General Health questionnaire (GHQ-28) and Differentiation of Self Inventory (DSI), which their reliabilities were, respectively, 0.62 and 0.88. Each group completed DSI in pre-post & follow-up stages. The Experimental couples participated in Bowenian group couple therapy for 90 minutes-eight sessions per week. The data were analyzed by descriptive statistics and t-test for independent group. This article is aimed at studying the effectiveness of Bowenian group couple therapy on couples' self-differentiations from their own families of origin.

Keywords: Group couples therapy, Bowen approach, self-differentiations.

Introduction

Identity is the core of personality and the family is the origin of their own members' identities, which get it to them by inducing the sense of belongings and separateness¹. The sense of separateness is in fact the self-differentiation or emotional autonomy. Self-differentiation- the most major concept in Bowenian theory- is the individual's ability to differentiate rational process from emotional one², is that, to be attained the level of emotional independence that s/he may be able to decide. Albeit, differentiating rational from emotional processes doesn't means tend to be extremely objective and stopping emotional statements, but it means that the individuals shouldn't be affected by emotions and feelings that they misunderstand them. The differentiations basically try to balance feelings and cognitions. Indeed, Bowen theory claimed that the key of mental health is, both, to be belonged to / and separated from family³. Families, to be formed in any ways, are the part of natural world. So, imagining a natural world is impossible without thinking about systems⁴.

Bowen believed, "when we can understand the family better that analyzes it in a historical or multigenerational framework. He emphasized that all families' problems are due to an emotional system. In his opinion, spouses are the prime architectures their own families and children's emotional climate³. Bowen believes that each spouse has taught a style in his/her family of origin and they want to repeat it in other relationships and transfer the same pattern to their off-springs. Therefore, the only solution of the present problem is to change the individual's relationship with family of origin. Then, individuals could differentiate and react the less when they confront with current emotional forces.

The low levels of differentiation lead to increase chronic anxiety within individual and the chronic anxiety in return result in produce syndrome in lon-run⁵. This syndrome may display themselves such as physical problems, emotional problems, or marital conflicts, which are cornerstone of their chronic anxiety. This chronic anxiety, in turn, is the sub-product of decreased differentiation. So, the sole solution to getting rid of chronic anxiety is moving toward differentiation³.

Skowron in investigating 609 adults who have low emotional reactivity and less emotional cut-off and low fusion with others and they were able to express their own "positions", have displayed that they have less chronic anxiety and higher psychological adjustment and more marital satisfaction⁶.

Skowron and Dendy studied the relationship between differentiation and effort-oriented control among 225 adults sample and concluded that high differentiation predicts effort-oriented control as uniquely. The more ability to get I-position (IP) in relations with less emotional reactivity (ER) and less dependency anxiety uniquely predicted effort-oriented control; and the it has been showed meaningful correlations between attachment and differentiation, also it was founded the strong correlation between attachment and emotional reactivity ($r=0/6$)⁷.

Feministic family therapists such as Carter and Mac Goldrick⁸, Shadwer and Friedlander⁹ and Miller R. and Halpern¹⁰ postulated that there are differences between females and males' differentiations, that is, women may respond to items of emotional reactivity subscale positively, but men may respond

to items of emotional cut-off. Findings suggest that women report more affective reactivity than men, but there wasn't meaningful difference among women and men in emotional cut-off subscale.

Alayki and Nazari in a study conducted on 40 couples whom employed in *Tarbiat Moalem* University founded that there are meaningful correlation between differentiation and it's subscales (emotional reactivity, emotional cut-off, I-position, and involvement with others) with marital satisfaction at the level of 0/001¹¹.

Regarding to other findings and this fact that the Bowen theory is worldwide, we decided to test the following hypotheses; i. Group couple therapy with Bowen theory effect on couples' differentiation. ii. Group couple therapy with Bowen theory effect on couples' differentiation (emotional reactivity, emotional cut-off, I-position, and involvement / emotional fusion with others).

Material and Methods

This study is a quasi-experimental design with experimental and control group with pre-post- and follow up tests and random substitution. Statistical population included couples coming to Mehr Counseling and Psychological Services Center in 2010, and sample size were 30 couples. To getting assured of couples' general health, short form of general health questionnaire (GHQ-28) was conducted and 30 couples whose total scores were lower than 23 (cut-off point) were selected as sample. Then they were divided equally in experimental and control groups randomly (table 1).

Research tools were *General Health questionnaire (GHQ-28)* and *Differentiation of Self Inventory (DSI)*. GHQ-28 compounded 21 items and four subscales as somatic complains,

anxiety and sleep disorders, severe depression, and social dysfunction. Scoring to each item was as 4-grades likert. Low score means the person has general health and the score over than 23 means s/he may be disordered. The average time to responding is 8 minutes and its reliability was computed 0.62 for total scale and for each subscales respectively, were 0.52, 0.52, 0.53, and 0.62¹². The other instrument was *DSI* which is a 46 item inventory to assess individuals' differentiations. It has 4 subscales named as emotional reactivity, emotional cut-off, I-position, and involvement/ emotional fusion with others and it mainly focuses on individuals' current communication with their families of origin¹³. This inventory has been ranged in a 6 points continuum. Lower scores are the signs of low levels of differentiation.

Skowron and Friendlier⁹ reported the validity of *DSI* using Cronbach Alfa coefficient about 0.88 in their research. On the other hand, McDowell and Jeris L. reported 0.86 in their study¹⁴. In Iran, the validity of *DSI* has been computed about 0.81¹⁵. In order to analyze data, it has been used descriptive parameters. Kolmogrov-Smirnov and T-student test for independent groups.

Findings: This study was conducted to determining effectiveness of Bowenian group couple therapy on differentiation of couples attending in MEHR Psychological and Counseling Services Center in 1389. Regarding to data in table 1 All couples had general health. In this research, authors wanted to find answers for 2 hypotheses: first, Group couple therapy with Bowenian approach influences on couples' differentiation in post test and follow-up phases. And second, Group couple therapy with Bowenian approach influences on couples' components of differentiation in post test and follow-up phases. These components are emotional reactivity, I-Position, emotional cut-off, and emotional fusion/ involvement. Data analyses have been illustrated in tables 2.

Table-1
Descriptive Parameters of GHQ-28 and its subscales of Couples' scores

Parameters Variables	Groups	Mean	Standard Deviation	Standard error of mean
Somatic complains	Experimental	4.95	1.299	1.687
	Control	5.32	1.620	2.625
Anxiety and sleep disorders	Experimental	2.76	1.608	2.586
	Control	2.71	1.440	2.074
Social dysfunction	Experimental	2.36	1.637	2.863
	Control	2.39	1.482	2.199
Severe depression	Experimental	2.354	1.534	2.354
	Control	2.596	1.611	2.596
Total score	Experimental	15.13	3.550	12.605
	Control	15.36	3.610	13.038

Table-2
Result of Kolmogrov-Smirnov for Normal score distribution of couples' differentiation scores in pre-test

Parameter of kolmogrov-Smirnov (Z size)	DF	Level of meaningfulness
1.843	60	0.002

As it could be observed Z size is meaningful at level of 0.002, that is, the distribution of sample's differentiation scores is normal. Also, Levine test has been used to study scores' variances of differentiation in both experimental and control groups which its findings has been showed in table 3.

As, it has been showed in table 2 the observed F in differentiation and its components are not meaningful at phases of post and follow-up tests at the level of 0.005. That is, the hypothesis of non-equality of variances has been rejected and the variances of both groups are equal. So, regarding with the results of Kolmogrov-smirnov test (table 2) and Levine test (table 3) we can use student-t test for two independent groups both in total scale and subscales of differentiation.

Data of table 4 show that there is significant difference between experimental and control groups in both post and follow-up phases in total score of differentiation and its components at levels of 0.05, that is, both hypotheses have been confirmed. Regarding to observed eta effect in table 3 the effect of the intervention in post and follow-up phases, respectively, ranged

from minimum 0.58 to maximum 0.96 and at least 0.65 to maximum 0.92. That is, Bowenian group couple therapy could decrease emotional cut-off till %58 rate and increase differentiation till %96 in couples². Also, this effect size in follow-up phase decreased emotional reactivity at least %65 and %92 in couples' total score in couples' differentiation. Regarding with power of estimate (0.60 and 0.98), it could be said that the observed difference of effect in both two groups in emotional cut-off subscale was lower and in the total differentiation scale was higher.

Results and Discussion

The confirmation of first hypothesis suggests the effectiveness of Bowenian group couple therapy on couples' differentiation. This finding confirmed the Skowron and Dandy's finding which showed that high self- differentiation uniquely predicts effort-oriented control produce the more ability to show I-position in relationships (IP) along with less emotional reactivity and less incorporation anxiety.

Table-3
Results of Levine test for equality of variances

Phase of testing	Dimensions of differentiation	F	Sig.
Post-test	Emotional fusion with others	0.260	0.612
	Emotional reactivity	0.947	0.335
	I-position	0.014	0.907
	Emotional cut-off	1.766	0.189
	Differentiation	1.378	0.245
Follow-up test	Emotional fusion with others	0.038	0.847
	Emotional reactivity	1.071	0.305
	I-position	0.153	0.679
	Emotional cut-off	0.554	0.460
	Differentiation	2.540	0.116

Table-4
Results of t-test for comparing the couples' difference of scores mean

Phase of testing	Variables s Parameter	t-test	df	P.value	Difference of mean	SD. Dev. Of Diff. of Mean	Eta ²	Power of estimate
Post-test	Emotional fusion with others	2.69	58	0.009	0.700	0.26005	0.92	0.93
	Emotional reactivity	2.84	58	0.006	0.666	0.23423	0.71	0.78
	I-position	3.34	58	0.001	1.233	0.36833	0.95	0.98
	Emotional cut-off	3.51	58	0.001	0.800	0.22743	0.58	0.60
	Differentiation	6.11	58	0.0001	4.800	0.78550	0.96	0.98
Follow-up test	Emotional fusion with others	3.83	58	0.0001	0.766	0.20010	0.73	0.87
	Emotional reactivity	2.63	58	0.011	0.600	0.22743	0.65	0.81
	I-position	8.42	58	0.0001	1.833	0.21770	0.87	0.95
	Emotional cut-off	2.25	58	0.028	0.733	0.32460	0.82	0.88
	Differentiation	12.11	58	0.0001	6.600	0.54492	0.92	0.82

Reaching adulthood necessarily doesn't mean self-differentiation from family of origin, and persons often in their adulthood may be affected by their families' introjections (impaired relations with family of origin and impairment in family emotional system). One of the characteristics of undifferentiated families is that their members have weak self-identity and the lack of assertiveness to express their real feelings and statements to one another. Thereby, the utilization of Bowen theory for enhancing individuals' differentiation may solve such problems. Also, findings suggested that this intervention could decrease the rate of couples' emotional fusion with others (their parents), increase I-position, decline emotional cut-off, and lower their emotional reactivity in post and follow-up phases. This finding is congruent with Schmeit and Skowron's study that found meaningful relation between couples' higher emotional fusion and adults' unsafe dimension of dependency. Bowen believed that in marital relationship whenever the couples' level of differentiation is low, the more emotional fusion takes place that the state leads to decline of marital quality and low adjustment in marital relations¹⁴. Instead, couples who have the least emotional fusion together, the more individuality they have which gives them the more stable togetherness². Since, individuals who have high emotional fusion with their parents their feelings are dominant and use rational thoughts the less in confronting with different situations. These people need strongly to get confirmation by significant others and in stressful situations and interpersonal problems, they are prone to psychological difficulties more than others. According to Alayki¹¹ Bowenian therapy provides optimal functioning and satisfaction in dyadic relationships through balancing in self-differentiation and its components by differentiating feelings and rationality.

Another finding was the impact of Bowenian group couple therapy on decreasing couples' emotional reactivity. This finding was congruent with Skowron and dandy's finding which showed that increased self-differentiation in adulthood along with emotional reactivity predicts lower incorporation anxiety and high successful controlling⁷. Since, couples with high emotional reactivity couldn't use their cognitive functioning so well and couldn't choose effective and innovative reactions when they confront with situations. Bowenian group couple therapy provides them with opportunity to know their own family patterns through having new knowledge (genogram-making) and they could anticipate these patterns. Then, they could decide whether they choose and plan to agree with or act against them or select another response. Therefore, this approach can play effective role in decline emotional reactivity. Another finding of this study was the effectiveness of this approach on increased I-position among couples. This finding was congruent with Skowron and Friedlinder's finding which showed that those who have decreased emotional reactivity and less emotional cut-off and less emotional fusion and also could express their I-Position; they have lower chronic anxiety, higher psychological adjustment and more marital satisfaction⁹. In many cases, lack

of strengthen I-Position and independent identity produce the sense of inadequacy when individual confront with varied situations and thereby his/her anxiety will be increased and this cycle will go on continuously then his/her function may be disordered and thereby it resulted in the sense of inadequacy and finally weak self-dependency. Bowenian group couple therapy could be effective for couples because it emphasizes on their I-positions as one dimension of differentiation.

The last finding was the impact of Bowenian group couple therapy on couples' level of emotional cut-off in post and follow-up phases. Emotional cut-off is, indeed, to escape from family unresolved conflicts and self or others' deceptions. Blair, Nelson and Colman studied the relations of deceptions, power and self-differentiation among college students' romantic relationships. They found that the more the self-differentiation is high, the less the self-deception is likely to occur¹⁶.

Emotional cut-off can happen as distancing from his/her own family, psychological obstacles such as not talking with one family member or unresolved conflicts with family members. It has been observed that difficult couples act to emotional cut-off from their spouse when they confront with acute problems or reversely, they react extremely as emotional attaching and over involving in others (often their families of origin, thereby, dysfunctioning in balanced differentiation, marital dissatisfaction and adjustment among them could be escalated. As Bowen believed, the only way to challenge with these problems is through differentiation, since, differentiation is a process which indicates individual autonomy emotionally and rationally and the one can learn to decide independently. He recommends that individuals return to their homes after getting I-position and increased differentiation. He stated that returning to family of origin is important step to lowering residual anxiety due to emotional cut-off.

Conclusion

This study regarding with its emphasis on decreased emotional cut-off among couples as one component of differentiation could show that it was one effective strategy for resolving family of origin's hidden agenda and improving their relationships. Because, living in undifferentiated and unhealthy functioning can may expose family members to impairments due to chronic anxiety and threatens their own mental health. But, differentiated people may be affected the less by anxieties in society and family emotional climates so they may have more mental health. In sum, regarding with cited findings, it could be said that Bowen theory on self-differentiation with some exceptions such as the more emotional cut-off among males, and the more emotional reactivity among females is almost worldwide. Therefore, this theory provides couples an opportunity to keep their emotional autonomy with their families of origin.

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