

## ASSESSING INTERPERSONAL FUSION: RELIABILITY AND VALIDITY OF A NEW DSI FUSION WITH OTHERS SUBSCALE

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*The Differentiation of Self Inventory (DSI) is a multidimensional measure of differentiation consisting of four subscales focusing on adults (ages 25+), and their significant relationships, including current relationships with family of origin. Although the DSI full scale and three of its subscales are theoretically and psychometrically sound, the Fusion with Others (FO) subscale is lacking. Therefore, responses of 225 adults were used to revise the FO subscale. Results yielded a 12-item, revised FO subscale with improved internal consistency reliability and construct validity. Greater fusion with others was associated with greater spousal fusion and dimensions of adult attachment insecurity. Implications for Bowen theory and suggestions for future research with the DSI-R are discussed.*

Since Bowen family systems theory was introduced in the 1960s, family therapists have commonly turned to the concept of differentiation of self to account for the manner in which a family system influences the health and development of its members (i.e., capacity for personal responsibility, autonomous behavior, and close emotional connections with others (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Ulrich, 1981; Bowen, 1978; Schnarch, 1997). Because of the complexity of Bowen's concepts and the inherent challenges in accurately operationalizing them (Gurman & Kniskern, 1991), the development of psychometrically sound measures of concepts central to Bowen theory has lagged behind theoretical advances. Yet recently, several systematic efforts have been underway to operationalize one of the central constructs in Bowen theory—differentiation of self—opening the way for more empirical research investigating the role of differentiation in health and functioning of families and their members. Differentiation is a multidimensional construct that consists of an intrapsychic ability to distinguish between the feeling process and intellectual thinking process, and an interpersonal ability to maintain connections with others while achieving an autonomous self (Bowen, 1978; Kerr & Bowen, 1988). The Differentiation of Self Inventory (DSI; Skowron & Friedlander, 1998) is one relatively new self-report measure of differentiation derived from Bowen theory, developed to assess emotional functioning, intimacy, and autonomy in interpersonal relationships. Its subscales are designed to assess interpersonal (i.e., fusion and emotional cutoff) and intrapsychic dimensions of differentiation problems (i.e., emotional reactivity and difficulty taking an "I" position).

Within the intrapsychic dimension, differentiation of self entails a capacity for self-regulation—that is, an ability to distinguish between thinking and feeling systems, comfort with one's feelings and capacity to

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access them freely, along with the ability to achieve a solid sense of self and identify or express one's personal thoughts and perspectives. On an interpersonal level, more differentiated individuals are comfortable with intimacy in close relationships and, therefore, the need to regulate feelings of anxiety with fusion or emotional cutoff in relationships is decreased. According to Bowen theory (1978), interpersonal patterns of fusion with others or emotional cutoff both represent behavioral mechanisms for distance regulation, enacted to manage emotional overwhelm or perceived threats to safety. Some who gravitate toward use of emotional cutoff in relationships tend to project an exaggerated façade of independence and distance from others under stress. In contrast, interpersonal fusion is defined by Bowen (1978) as the blurring of boundaries between individuals or family members, or the borrowing and trading of "self" in relationships, leading to greater role constraint, difficulty tolerating differences of opinion, and difficulty making one's own decisions. Fusion is characterized by overinvolvement with significant others in decision making and difficulty formulating opinions or perspectives independent of one's parents or significant others—in other words, taking in others' beliefs and values in their entirety, without undertaking a thoughtful examination to determine their relative fit with one's personal life principles (Bowen, 1978; Friedman, 1991; Kerr, 1984; Kerr & Bowen, 1988).

The purpose of this study was to revise the DSI Fusion with Others (FO) subscale in an effort to strengthen its reliability and construct-related validity. The FO subscale was intended to assess interpersonal fusion in one's relationships with parents and significant others. Yet, studies conducted to date on the DSI have not yielded sufficient evidence for the subscale's psychometric and construct validity, leading to questions about whether the FO subscale measures Bowen's (1978; Kerr & Bowen, 1988) concept of fusion as intended. In our review of studies conducted with the DSI, the FO subscale appeared to be notably weaker than the other DSI subscales along dimensions of psychometric rigor, predictive utility, and conceptual clarity. For example, in terms of psychometric properties, whereas the other three DSI subscales post good internal consistencies of  $\alpha = .80$  and higher, the FO scale consistently demonstrated lower reliability estimates, ranging from .57–.74 (e.g., Skowron, 2000; Skowron & Friedlander, 1998).

With respect to the FO subscale's construct-related validity, contrary to theoretical expectations, no significant relationships have been observed between FO scores and psychological adjustment (Skowron, in press; Skowron & Friedlander, 1998), problem-solving skills (Skowron, in press), or relationship satisfaction (Kosek, 1998; Skowron, 2000; Skowron & Friedlander, 1998). In contrast, research using alternate measures of fusion or measures focused on related constructs have yielded considerable evidence linking dimensions of interpersonal fusion with a range of deficits in adult psychosocial development. For example, intergenerational fusion measured using the Personal Authority in the Family System Questionnaire (PAFS; Bray, Williamson, & Malone, 1984a), has been associated with delays in the developmental tasks of intimacy and identity achievement (Garbarino, Gaa, Swank, McPherson, & Gratch, 1995) and career decision making in emerging adulthood (Larson & Wilson, 1998). Adults reporting greater fusion in their intimate relationships as measured by the Codependency Assessment (Potter-Efron & Potter-Efron, 1989) also experienced more psychological symptoms, including interpersonal distrust, perfectionism, body dissatisfaction, poor interoceptive awareness, bulimic behaviors, and drive for thinness (Meyer, 1997).

Interpersonal fusion also has been shown to play a detrimental role in intimate adult relationships. For example, PAFS intergenerational fusion scores have been linked with less cognitive flexibility and greater presence of complementarity and symmetry in marriages (Winn, Crawford, & Wampler, 1995). Rosen, Bartle-Haring, and Stith (2001) found more frequent boundary violations (i.e., characteristic of fusion with others), as measured by the Behavioral and Emotional Reactivity Index (Bartle & Sabatelli, 1998), and greater emotional reactivity in one's family-of-origin and dating relationships were linked to greater severity of physical violence in dating relationships (Rosen et al., 2001). Likewise, behavioral and cognitive-behavior focused research (e.g., Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Margolin & Wampold, 1981) has yielded indirect support for the relationship between spousal fusion and marital problems. Specifically, greater spouse demanding or pursuing (i.e., behavioral manifestations of fusion) observed in tandem with emotional cutoff in one's partner, has been linked with greater marital distress (Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Gottman & Krokoff, 1989) and less marital satisfaction (Waring & Patton, 1984).

Moreover, consistent with Bowen's propositions regarding the nuclear family emotional process, recent research has documented links between greater family fusion and childhood dysfunction. For example, family enmeshment has been linked with elevated systolic blood pressure among pregnant women, and in turn, lower infant birth weight (Mengel, Davis, Abell, Baker, & Ramsey, 1991). Family fusion has also been linked with behavioral disorders, particularly internalizing disorders, such as anxiety, depression, and withdrawal among 10–15 year olds (Barber & Buehler, 1996), health problems, lower self-esteem and lack of instrumentality among late adolescents (Fleming & Anderson, 1986), and inferior problem-solving skills among college students (Fraser & Tucker, 1997). In a study of adolescents and their families involved in a youth services bureau, Gavazzi, Anderson, and Sabatelli (1993) carefully distinguished between parental intrusiveness and family support in predicting youth adjustment. As hypothesized, severity of presenting problems and psychosocial immaturity among children was positively linked with parental intrusiveness and negatively associated with levels of perceived family support. In addition, parents who perceived their own parents as overprotective on the Parental Bonding Instrument (Parker, Tupling, & Brown, 1979), in turn reported greater anxiety and social phobia as adults, and engaged in greater overprotection of their own children as well (Parker & Lipscombe, 1981).

Despite the strong links observed between alternate measures of interpersonal fusion and dysfunction in children, adolescents, and adults, most research (e.g., Kosek, 1998; Skowron, 2000; Skowron, in press; Skowron, Wester, & Azen, in press) conducted using the FO subscale of the DSI has failed to corroborate these observations. Only one study using the DSI FO subscale to operationalize fusion has found support for theoretical relationship between interpersonal fusion and chronic anxiety in adulthood, (Skowron & Friedlander, 1998). We concluded, based on our review of the subscale's performance, that the source of problems with the FO subscale involves a lack of conceptual clarity in its items. We suspect that the current subscale is characterized by conceptual deficiencies, yielding a scale that taps maladaptive fusion with others (e.g., "My self-esteem really depends on how others think of me") along with elements of adaptive attachment security in adult relationships, and mature concern for others (e.g., "It has been said [or could be said] of me that I am still very attached to my parents" and "Whenever there is a problem in my relationship, I'm anxious to get it settled right away"). Therefore, revisions to the FO subscale were needed to develop conceptual clarity in item content. Scores on a revised DSI FO scale were expected to positively correlate with an alternate measure of fusion, namely the PAFS, and with a measure of attachment insecurity. According to Bowlby's (1982) attachment theory, the experience of secure attachments to one's caregivers promotes a felt sense of safety and confident self-expression. Therefore, we hypothesized that individuals who gravitate toward fusion with others will be more likely to report insecure attachments in their relationships with important others. That is, we expected that scale revisions to the FO subscale would yield a negative correlation between it and a measure of attachment insecurity.

In sum, the purpose of this study was to complete conceptual and psychometric revisions to the DSI's FO subscale and test for evidence of the subscale's construct-related validity. First, the FO subscale was reconceptualized and its content reviewed by several expert family therapists knowledgeable about Bowen theory. Next, the reconceptualized FO scale items were revised to strengthen its psychometric properties through a series of statistical item analyses. Finally, an assessment of its construct-related (convergent) validity was performed by testing relations between FO scores and alternate measures of fusion and attachment insecurity in relationships. Specifically, we hypothesized that greater fusion, as measured by the revised FO scale, would correspond with greater spousal and intergenerational fusion, fear of abandonment, and desires to merge with others.

## METHODS

### *Participants and Procedure*

Participants were 225 adults, 79% women and 21% men, with a mean age of 36.31 years ( $SD = 11.30$ ). Most participants were either married (42.7%), remarried (5.5%), or cohabitating (14.2%), whereas the remaining were single, never married (20.6%), separated or divorced (16.5%), or widowed (0.5%). The

majority (69.3%) of individuals were employed, with median household income between \$50,000 and \$60,000. The ethnic composition of the sample was 4.9% biracial/multiracial, 1.8% African American, 0.8% Asian American/Pacific Islander, 0.9% Latino, 1.3% Native American, and 86.6% European American. Participants' highest levels of education were as follows: 11.6% high school graduates; 44.4% some college/technical training; 23.6% bachelors degree; 15.1% masters degree; and 0.4% doctorate, MD, or JD. More than one-half (61.9%) reported a history of counseling or psychotherapy, with mean satisfaction of 2.17 ( $SD = 1.01$ ) on a scale of 1 (very satisfied) to 4 (very dissatisfied).

Participants were solicited through the World Wide Web via news groups focusing on family and parenting issues, relationships, and genealogy. Recent research has documented the equivalence of Internet-based (computer) and paper-and-pencil versions of questionnaires, irrespective of gender (Lunz & Deville, 1996; Miles & King, 1998). Specifically, a letter was posted introducing the study, its focus on individuals' experiences in close relationships, the web address for the survey, and instructions for logging on to the password-protected web site. Interested individuals located the survey web site, selected an anonymous identification (which facilitated collating individual questionnaires as they were submitted), and used the password provided in the letter to access the questionnaires. Questionnaires were presented in a random order followed by a brief demographic survey. These volunteer participants completed and submitted each questionnaire separately. Approximately 620 hits were recorded for the website, and, of those hits, 255 individuals submitted responses to the questionnaires, yielding a 41% return rate. Of those submitted, 30 were deleted for missing responses on at least one questionnaire, resulting in a final sample of 225 adults.

### *Instruments*

*Differentiation of Self Inventory (DSI)*. The DSI (Skowron & Friedlander, 1998) is a 43-item self-report measure that focuses on adults, their significant relationships, and current relations with family of origin. Participants rate items using a 6-point, Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (not at all true of me) to 6 (very true of me). The DSI contains four subscales: Emotional Reactivity (ER), "I" Position (IP), Emotional Cutoff (EC), and Fusion with Others (FO). The 11-item ER scale assesses the tendency to respond to environmental stimuli on the basis of autonomic emotional responses, emotional flooding, or lability. Scores are reversed so that higher scores reflect less emotional reactivity or greater differentiation of self. The 11-item IP scale contains items that reflect a clearly defined sense of self and the ability to thoughtfully adhere to one's convictions even when pressured to do otherwise. Higher scores indicate an ability to take an "I" position or greater differentiation of self. The 13-item EC scale consists of items reflecting fears of intimacy or engulfment in relationships, and the accompanying behavioral defenses against those fears. Higher scores indicate less emotional cutoff, or greater differentiation. The 9-item FO scale in its original form reflects emotional overinvolvement with significant others and overidentification with one's parents—taking in parental values, beliefs and expectations without question. Higher scores indicate less fusion or greater differentiation of self. Revisions to the FO subscale are detailed below. No revisions were made in this study to the ER, IP, and EC subscales.

To compute scores on the subscales, select items are reversed. Then items are summed across the subscale and divided by the number of items, such that scores on each subscale range from 1 to 6, with high scores reflecting greater differentiation of self. Internal consistency reliabilities of the original DSI and its subscales were reported by Skowron and Friedlander (1998) as: DSI full scale = .88, ER = .84, IP = .85, EC = .82, and FO = .74. Confirmatory factor analyses support the DSI's four-factor structure.

*Personal Authority in the Family System Questionnaire (PAFS)*. The PAFS (Bray et al., 1984a) consists of 132 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale. For this study, only the Intergenerational Fusion/Individuation (IFI) and Spousal Fusion/Individuation (SFI) subscales were employed to assess fusion in relationships. Scores are calculated by reversing select items, summing across all items on a scale, and dividing by the total number of items on that scale. The IFI scale contains eight items that assess the degree to which a person and his/her parents operate in a fused or individuated manner with one another (e.g., "My parents do things that embarrass me," and "My parents frequently try to change some aspect of my personality"). Higher scores indicate less fusion in one's relationships with parents. The SFI scale consists of 20 items that

measure the extent to which a person operates in a fused or individuated manner with his or her spouse or significant other and perceptions of spouse's fused or individuated behaviors (e.g., "I need my mate's approval for my ideas and decisions," and "My mate wants to hear everything that happens while my mate is away from me." Higher scores indicate lower fusion in one's relationship with one's spouse. Internal consistency reliabilities using Cronbach's alphas were reported by Bray, Harvey, and Williamson (1987) as: IFI = .75 and SFI = .94. In the current sample, Cronbach's alphas were somewhat lower at .77 and .69, respectively. Evidence for the construct-related validity of the PAFS has been documented in relations between lower spousal fusion and better marital satisfaction, family functioning, psychosocial adjustment, and health.

*Experiences in Close Relationships Inventory (ECR).* The ECR (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1996, 1998) is a 142-item self-report inventory of adult attachment, comprised of 12 attachment-related dimensions and two higher order scales measuring anxiety and avoidance. Two of the attachment dimension scales—Desire to Merge with Partners (DMP) and Fear of Abandonment (FOA)—were used in this study. Each scale is comprised of 10 items. Higher scores represent greater desires to merge and fears of abandonment, respectively. Internal consistency reliabilities reported by Brennan et al. (1996) were high, with Cronbach's alphas for FOA = .91, and DMP = .89. Internal consistencies of the scales were similar in the current sample: FOA = .95 and DMP = .90.

### DEVELOPMENT OF THE REVISED FUSION WITH OTHERS SUBSCALE

We followed Skowron and Friedlander's (1998) original approach to development of the DSI (i.e., construct approach to test construction; Jackson, 1970; Loevinger, 1957) to complete revisions to the FO subscale. Five of the original nine FO items were retained because of their emphasis on emotional overinvolvement and overidentification with parents' values, beliefs, and expectations. Murray Bowen's writings (e.g., Anonymous, 1972; Bowen, 1976, 1978; Kerr & Bowen, 1988) were consulted to expand the conceptual definition of fusion to include a heavy reliance on significant others to confirm one's own beliefs and decisions, and a tendency to hold few constant beliefs of one's own. According to Bowen (1978), fusion in relationships is characterized by a façade of a pseudoself (i.e., whereby individuals engage in borrowing and lending self), whereas higher levels of differentiation entail engagement with others while maintaining a clear, solid sense of self. Bowen (1978) explained:

The solid self does not participate in the fusion phenomenon. The solid self says, "This is who I am, what I believe, what I stand for, and what I will do or will not do," in a given situation. The solid self is made up of clearly defined beliefs, opinions, convictions, and life principles...incorporated into self from one's own life experiences, by a process of intellectual reasoning and the careful consideration of the alternatives involved in the choice. (p. 365)

Twenty-six new items were written to capture the expanded focus of the subscale and submitted to three experts on Bowen theory, each having more than 15 years of experience in family systems research and practice. All three experts were involved in the original development of the DSI. Experts were instructed to rate each item on the extent to which it assessed fusion, was clear and unambiguous, contained social desirability bias, or overlapped substantially with other items listed, and to provide written feedback if desired. Based on their responses, 17 of the 26 new FO items were selected for inclusion and combined with the 5 original items to form a pre-revision FO subscale of 22 items. The sample size ( $N = 225$ ) was sufficient for scale revisions, based on Nunnally's (1978) guidelines for scale construction recommending use of 10 participants per item. Descriptive statistical analyses were performed at the item level. Specifically, on the basis of participants' responses, all items were evaluated according to criteria similar to those outlined in the original development of the DSI, including: (a) characteristics of response distributions, (b) item-subscale correlations, (c) convergent and discriminant validity, and (d) influence on the subscale's internal consistency reliability (see Skowron & Friedlander, 1998).

## RESULTS

### *Item Analyses*

To achieve the goal of improving reliability and construct validity of the FO subscale while retaining the desirable factor structure of the existing DSI, statistical analyses were performed at the item level on the responses of the 225 adults in the sample. Analysis of item response distributions indicated that all FO items had skewness and kurtosis values within 1.5 and standard deviation equal to or less than one-sixth of the mean. With respect to item-scale correlations, the decision rule (i.e.,  $r > .40$ ) prompted deletion of four FO items with item-scale correlations ranging from .29–.39. Convergent and discriminant validity at the item level was assessed via the pattern of correlations between each FO item, the FO subscale, and the other three DSI scales. Four additional FO items were deleted because they each correlated more highly with another DSI subscale than with the FO subscale. Specifically, two items each loaded more highly on the IP or EC subscales. Finally two additional items were deleted because they lowered the internal consistency reliability of the FO scale. These revisions yielded a final FO subscale with 12 items.

Because of gender imbalance in the sample, statistical item analyses were conducted a second time using a sample weighting procedure (Levy & Lemeshow, 1999) to approximate the population gender distribution of equal men and women. Scale revisions were reconducted using the weighted sample, with results virtually identical to the original analyses. Specifically, final results of item analyses based on the weighted sample yielded a FO subscale with 11 items identical to those that emerged from analyses on the unweighted sample reported above. Using the (gender-equated) weighted sample, one additional item was deleted for correlating more highly with another DSI subscale than with the FO scale. Internal consistency reliability calculated on the FO subscale developed using weighted sample scores yielded a Cronbach's alpha of .84 versus the alpha of .86 calculated using the original, unweighted sample. Therefore, given the consistency in findings across the unweighted and gender weighted samples, it was concluded that gender makeup of the sample did not contribute to artifacts in the final item selections for the FO subscale; thus, revisions were conducted using the unweighted sample.

### DIFFERENTIATION OF SELF INVENTORY-REVISED (DSI-R)

The DSI-R full scale consists of 46 items that assess four dimensions of differentiation: Emotional Reactivity (ER), "I" Position (IP), Emotional Cutoff (EC), and Fusion with Others (FO), as shown in Appendix 1. Internal consistency reliabilities calculated using Cronbach's alpha were high for the subscales and full scale: DSI-R full scale = .92, FO = .86, ER = .89, IP = .81, EC = .84. The revised, 12-item FO scale measures emotional overinvolvement with others, including parents (e.g., "I want to live up to my parents' expectations of me" and "I feel it's important to hear my parents' opinions before making decisions"), heavy reliance on others in decision making (e.g., "I often feel unsure when others are not around to help me make a decision"), and holding few constant beliefs of one's own (e.g., "I often agree with others just to appease them" and "I feel a need for approval from virtually everyone in my life"). All FO items except item 37 are reverse scored. As shown in Appendix 1, to compute the four subscale scores, all items on the ER and EC scales are reversed, item 35 on the IP scale is reverse scored, and all items on the FO scale are reversed except item 37. Raw scores are then summed and divided by the number of items comprising each subscale (i.e., ER = 11, IP = 11, EC = 12, FO = 12), such that scores on each of the subscales range from 1 to 6, with higher scores reflecting less emotional reactivity, greater ability to take "I" positions in relationships, less emotional cutoff, and less fusion with others, respectively, or greater differentiation of self. The DSI-R full scale score is obtained by reversing scores on the items noted, then summing across all items and dividing by 46. Scores on the full scale also range from 1 to 6, with higher scores reflecting greater differentiation of self.

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, intercorrelations among the four subscales, and subscale–full scale correlations. Intercorrelations among the subscales were low to moderate, ranging from .24 to .66 (all  $p < .001$ ). Subscale–full scale correlations were moderate to high, ranging from .62 (EC) to .86 (ER). As shown in Table 1, there were moderate positive correlations between ER, IP, and FO, and relatively smaller correlations between EC and the other three subscales.

Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations, and Intercorrelations among DSI-R, ECR, and PAFS scales

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
DSI-R									
Emotional Reactivity	—								
"I" Position	.56	—							
Emotional Cutoff	.39	.24	—						
Fusion with Others	.66	.54	.24	—					
DSI-R total score	.86	.75	.62	.80	—				
ECR									
Fear of Abandonment	-.44	-.35	-.47	-.36	-.53	—			
Desire to Merge	-.46	-.27	-.37	-.33	-.47	.77	—		
PAFS-Q									
Spousal Fusion	.39	.33	.45	.29	.48	-.34	-.32	—	
Intergen. Fusion	.38	.27	.40	.11*	.38	-.35	-.30	.25	—
Mean	3.15	4.07	4.34	3.84	3.86	3.32	3.11	3.52	3.55
SD	1.06	.85	.93	.98	.72	1.71	1.34	.45	.82

Note. Higher scores on the Differentiation of Self Inventory-R (DSI-R) subscales indicate less emotional reactivity, emotional cutoff, and fusion with others, and greater ability to take an "I"- position. Higher DSI-R total scores reflect greater differentiation of self. Higher scores on the Experiences in Close Relationships (ECR) Fear of Abandonment and Desire to Merge scales represent greater fears of abandonment and desires to merge with another, respectively. Higher scores on the Personal Authority in the Family System (PAFS) Spousal Fusion and Intergenerational Fusion scales represent greater individuation in relationships with partners and parents, respectively.

\* $p = .09$ . All other correlations significant at  $p < .001$ .

#### Gender, Age, and Relational Status

Because of previous research suggesting that gender, age, and relational status differences may exist among different components of differentiation of self (e.g., Elieson & Rubin, 2001; Skowron, 2000; Skowron & Friedlander, 1998), demographic differences on the DSI-R were assessed. Results of one-way ANOVAs yielded statistically significant gender differences on the ER and IP scales,  $F(1,222) = 7.89$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $r = .19$ ,  $r^2 = .04$ , and  $F(1,222) = 5.42$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $r = .15$ ,  $r^2 = .02$ , respectively. Women reported greater emotional reactivity ( $M = 3.04$ ,  $SD = 1.05$ ) and more problems taking "I" positions in relationships ( $M = 4.00$ ,  $SD = .86$ ), than did men (ER:  $M = 3.52$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ ; and IP:  $M = 4.33$ ,  $SD = .79$ ). Using a binomial effect size display to interpret the practical significance of these gender differences by translating mean differences into percentages of men versus women who scored above versus below the median on the dependent variable of interest (Rosenthal & Rubin, 1982), it was observed that only 19% more men than women in this sample fell above the median ER score, or could be considered low in emotional reactivity, and 19% more women were identified with low ER scores, or high on emotional reactivity. Likewise, just 15% more men than women produced scores above the median on IP, or were high in their ability to take "I" positions in relationships, and an equal percentage of women scored below the median, indicating trouble taking "I" positions in relationships. Gender differences on the revised FO scale merely approached significance,  $F(1,222) = 3.73$ ,  $p = .06$ , whereas no differences were observed on the EC subscale,  $F(1,222) = .24$ ,  $p = .62$ . No age differences on the DSI-R subscales were observed,  $F(4,215) = .31$ ,  $p = .87$ ,  $R = .08$ . Likewise, no significant relationships emerged between participants' DSI scores and personal or household income levels, marital status, ethnicity, or experience in therapy. It is interesting to note that a significant

Predictor variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$	<i>sr</i>
Spousal Fusion	.41	.15	.19	.17**
Intergenerational Fusion	-.05	.08	-.05	-.04
Fear of Abandonment	-.13	.06	-.22	-.14*
Desire to Merge	-.09	.07	-.12	-.08

*Note.*  $R^2 = .17$ .  
\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ .

relationship was observed between level of education and DSI scores,  $F(4, 206) = 2.59, p < .05, R^2 = .05$ . Specifically, individuals who reported more education were also more likely to report greater emotional cutoff in relationships,  $t(210) = 2.14, p = .03, sr = -.15, sr^2 = .02$ .

#### *Intergenerational Fusion, Spousal Fusion, and Attachment*

To evaluate the construct-related validity of the new FO subscale, relations between DSI FO scores and scores on the two PAFS Fusion/Individuation scales and two ECR attachment dimension scales were examined. Zero-order correlations between the PAFS scales, ECR scales, and DSI-R subscales are presented in Table 1. As shown, greater fusion with others, measured by the FO subscale, was significantly associated with greater PAFS spousal fusion, ECR fear of abandonment, and ECR desire to merge with others. The zero-order correlation between PAFS IFI and DSI-R FO scores was nonsignificant ( $r = .11$ ). In contrast, as seen in Table 1, the highest correlations between the DSI-R subscales and the PAFS scales tested in this study were observed for the EC scale and PAFS IFI and SFI scale scores ( $r = .40$  and  $.45$ , respectively).

Next, a simultaneous multiple regression analysis was conducted using four predictors—PAFS SFI and IFI, ECR Fear of Abandonment and Desire to Merge—and a single criterion variable—DSI-R FO scores. Results were significant,  $F(4, 220) = 11.00, p < .0001, R = .41, R^2 = .17$ , adjusted  $R^2 = .15$ , indicating that greater spousal fusion, intergenerational fusion, fear of abandonment, and desire to merge with partner, taken together, predicted more fusion with others on the DSI-R. Interpretation of the follow-up  $t$ -tests revealed two unique predictors of DSI FO scores, PAFS spousal fusion and ECR fear of abandonment,  $t(224) = 2.83, p < .01$ , and  $t(224) = -2.20, p < .03$ , respectively. Results are presented in Table 2, including regression coefficients, standard errors, and semipartial correlations associated with each predictor variable.

## DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to revise the DSI FO subscale, and strengthen its psychometric properties. Feedback from experts on Bowen theory regarding the subscale's content validity, along with good internal consistency reliability, and moderate intercorrelations between the FO subscale and other DSI-R subscales, taken together, provided initial evidence of the FO subscale's improved psychometric rigor. The revised FO subscale was designed to better assess elements of interpersonal fusion overlooked in the initial scale development, namely, heavy reliance on others for assistance in decision making, and a tendency to hold few constant beliefs of one's own, along with emotional overinvolvement with others. Of the 22 new and existing FO items considered for retention, 10 were deleted because of low item-scale correlations, overlap with other DSI-R subscales, or low internal consistency. Moderate intercorrelations among the DSI subscales indicating that the subscales share small amounts of variance lend support for the



multidimensional nature of the instrument. In line with Bowen theory (1978), individuals who report lower emotional reactivity and greater skills in taking "I" positions in relationships were also less likely to endorse use of fusion or emotional cutoff in relationships as mechanisms for distance regulation.

In addition, support for the construct-related validity of the revised FO subscale was obtained. As hypothesized, fusion with others measured via the DSI-R FO subscale corresponded with greater fusion in one's relationship with spouse, greater desires to merge with others, and fear of abandonment in relationships. Relations between the FO subscale and PAFS SFI scale suggest that these two measures assess similar dimensions of the fusion phenomenon. Likewise, these results provide direct evidence of linkages between Bowen's construct of fusion and several facets of adult attachment insecurity. Specifically, individuals who tend to engage in fusion with others also experience greater fears of abandonment and express a preference for intimate relationships that allow for psychological and emotional blurring of boundaries with one's partner, conceivably in an attempt to alleviate anxiety stemming from separation fears. These findings are consistent with other research documenting relations between insecure (i.e., preoccupied and fearful) styles of adult attachment and elements of fusion described by Bowen, including greater dependence on others to help regulate one's self-esteem (Mayseless, Danieli, & Sharabany, 1996), passivity in relationships, and greater difficulty expressing oneself in social situations (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991).

Contrary to our expectations, DSI-R Fusion scores were not significantly related to intergenerational fusion scores on the PAFS. A few possible explanations exist to account for the unexpected findings. First, inspection of items comprising the DSI-R FO subscale and the PAFS IFI scale suggests that these different scales may be measuring somewhat distinct elements of fusion in relationships. The PAFS IFI scale assesses fusion on a shared continuum with the individuation construct, in which fusion is located on the lower, or unhealthy end, whereas individuation lays at the higher, healthy end. In contrast, the DSI-R FO subscale is designed to assess a single construct of interpersonal fusion on a continuum of high to low. Fusion is conceptualized as one of four components of differentiation of self, whereas capacity to define an autonomous self is measured by the DSI-R IP subscale.

Second, the focus or target of the items differs across the DSI-R and PAFS measures of fusion. Whereas the DSI-R FO items inquire about a respondent's own experiences, thoughts, feelings, and relational behaviors to assess their own propensity toward fusion in relationships, the PAFS scales maintain a dual focus on the respondent's and his or her parents' fused behaviors with one another. Thus, high scores on the DSI-R FO scale are achieved only when the respondent endorses items specific to his or her own fused behavior with others. In contrast, high scores on the PAFS scales are obtained by endorsing both self and parent behaviors characteristic of fusion, whereas moderate scores may be obtained in several ways. Endorsement of only those items measuring parents' fusion behaviors, or alternately, of items assessing one's own fused behaviors in relations with parents may earn a respondent a moderate score on the PAFS IFI scale.

Although low correlations emerged between PAFS IFI and DSI-R FO scores, significantly higher correlations were observed between PAFS IFI scores and DSI-R EC scores, suggesting that respondents who reported greater fusion in their relationships with parents also engaged in emotional cutoff in close relationships. Although these findings were not in keeping with our hypotheses, they are consistent with Bray et al.'s (1984b) proposition that fusion in families of origin is expressed through overinvolvement or through emotional cutoff, and likewise make sense in the context of Bowen theory. According to Bowen's (1978) concept of the multigenerational transmission process, in less differentiated families, one or both parents may engage in fusion with their child to alleviate or manage chronic anxiety in the system. Individuals involved in fused relationships with their parents tend to leave home in a reactive manner, using emotional cutoff to exert a form of pseudo-independence from the family of origin (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). However, failure to successfully work out adult person-to-person relationships with parents is thought to leave one at higher risk to re-enact the fusion experienced in one's family of origin within one's current relationship with a spouse or partner. Thus significant correlations between PAFS IFI and DSI-R EC scores, between PAFS SFI and DSI-R FO, and nonsignificant relations between the PAFS IFI and DSI-R FO scores lend some support for Bowen's concept of a multigenerational transmission process. That is, individuals

who were more likely to report fusion in their spouse/partner relationships also endorsed greater tendencies to engage in fusion with others. At the same time, adults who reported greater fusion in their relations with parents indicated they also were more likely to use emotional cutoff in close relationships.

It is interesting to note that both fusion with others and emotional cutoff scores were also associated with greater fear of abandonment. These results indicate that individuals who gravitate toward either emotional cutoff or fusion in relationships, both tend to fear loss of connections with important others. Taken together, these findings suggest that individuals with similar relational fears about the strength of important relationship connections and worries about their dissolution may employ two very different relational strategies (i.e., emotional cutoff or fusion with others) for coping with the anxiety that accompanies those fears.

Although there were no differences between the scores of men and women on the FO subscale, gender differences emerged on two DSI-R subscales, with men indicating fewer problems with emotional reactivity and greater comfort in taking "I" positions in relationships than did women. Likewise, previous studies have documented similar gender differences along the emotional reactivity dimension (e.g., Skowron & Friedlander, 1998; Skowron, 2000; Skowron et al., in press). Viewed within the frameworks of sex-role socialization and self-in-relation theories (Chodorow, 1978; Josselson, 1988), the gender differences observed herein further confirm previous research (e.g., Kosek, 1998; Skowron & Friedlander, 1998), documenting gender differences in the ways that differentiation problems are expressed.

### *Limitations and Implications*

This study has several limitations that should be noted. First, the gender composition of the sample represents one limitation, in that relatively more women than men elected to respond to the survey. Although cross validation of results using a sample weighting procedure yielded essentially identical findings, indicating that the sample's gender composition did not compromise internal validity, caution must be exercised in generalizing these findings to diverse populations of men and women. For example, it may be that fewer men chose to participate because of a lower interest in relationship surveys. Alternatively, men who declined to participate may be more emotionally cutoff in their relationships than the men who chose to complete the study, which may account for the lack of gender differences observed in emotional cutoff scores. Further replications of these findings with a variety of samples of men and women are needed to clarify the populations to which these findings may generalize. In addition, the individual return rate for survey completion was just greater than 40%. Accordingly, the results should be generalized with caution to the larger population of adults, as the question remains as to whether those who chose not to respond would have produced different results than those who did (Rosenthal & Rosnow, 1991; Schwartz, Groves, & Schuman, 1998). Moreover, the study suffers from monomethod bias in that all measures employed were self-report in nature. Future investigations may sample indicators of fusion in adult child-parent interactions directly through use of observational coding strategies, such as the Resonance scale of the Structural Family Systems Rating Scale (Szapocznik et al., 1991) to determine whether self-report DSI-R FO scores would correspond in meaningful ways to observational indicators of fusion in relationships. Likewise, use of such multimethod strategies would provide an important test of the DSI-R FO scale's construct-related validity.

The results also suggested that younger adults are just as capable of achieving self-differentiation as older adults. Likewise, the capacity for differentiation was neither related to one's income/economic resources, nor to one's relationship status. However, an unexpected relationship emerged between emotional cutoff scores and level of education, in that adults who reported higher educational attainment also were most emotionally cut off in their relationships with others. Given that Bowen (1978) posited no relationship between educational level and capacity for differentiation, the finding that higher educational attainment was linked with greater emotional cutoff bears careful attention. One possible explanation is that such a relationship is merely a sampling artifact. In other words, the positive relationship between educational attainment and emotional cutoff may be something unique to this Internet sample. Subsequent studies are needed to test whether individuals identified through Internet sampling procedures tend to be more emotionally cutoff than those who are less inclined toward recreational Internet use or less likely to respond to an Internet survey. Although several studies demonstrated the equivalence of Internet-based (computer)

and paper-and-pencil sampling procedures (e.g., Lunz & Deville, 1996; Miles & King, 1998), one dissertation study (Weitzman, 2001) found lower levels of self-differentiation among adults identified as Internet "addicted" than adults who were nonaddicted, recreational Internet users. Further research using the DSI is needed to clarify the nature of relations between educational attainment, Internet access, recreational Internet use, and problems with self-differentiation in general, and emotional cutoff in particular.

In conclusion, it is expected that the results of this study may contribute to research and practice in family therapy. The psychometric improvements to the FO scale reported herein will enable researchers to use the DSI-R to formulate and test questions about relational anxiety expressed via fusion with others or emotional cutoff with greater confidence. Likewise, given the links observed between emotional cutoff, fusion, and relational insecurities such as preoccupation with intimacy and loss of relationships, future family systems research may be conducted to help clarify the ways in which family relational experiences in childhood and adolescence shape the construction of relations with one's parents and one's intimate relationships in adulthood.

In terms of practice, family therapists may find the DSI-R more useful in supplementing their assessment efforts with individuals and families. Likewise, future studies of individual, couple, and family therapies may use the DSI-R to test Bowen's proposition that therapy produces moderate increases in one's level of differentiation. Past correlational research has found that experience in therapy was associated with higher levels of differentiation and less emotional reactivity (e.g., Skowron & Friedlander, 1998); however, treatment effectiveness research is needed to ascertain whether therapy can produce systematic changes in self-differentiation. Of particular importance is whether the DSI-R subscales are sensitive to changes in client differentiation over the course of therapy. In sum, there is still much to be learned about the role of family systems in one's relational development. Family researchers are encouraged to employ the DSI-R among other measures of the multidimensional construct of differentiation in order to better understand and evaluate dimensions of Bowen family systems theory.

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## APPENDIX

### DSI-R

These are questions concerning your thoughts and feelings about yourself and relationships with others. Please read each statement carefully and decide how much the statement is *generally true* of you on a 1 (not at all) to 6 (very) scale. If you believe that an item does not pertain to you (e.g., you are not currently married or in a committed relationship, or one or both of your parents are deceased), please answer the item according to your best guess about what your thoughts and feelings would be in that situation. Be sure to answer every item and try to be as honest and accurate as possible in your responses.

	NOT AT ALL TRUE OF ME				VERY TRUE OF ME	
1. People have remarked that I'm overly emotional.	1	2	3	4	5	6
2. I have difficulty expressing my feelings to people I care for.	1	2	3	4	5	6
3. I often feel inhibited around my family.	1	2	3	4	5	6
4. I tend to remain pretty calm even under stress.	1	2	3	4	5	6
5. I usually need a lot of encouragement from others when starting a big job or task.	1	2	3	4	5	6
6. When someone close to me disappoints me, I withdraw from him/her for a time.	1	2	3	4	5	6
7. No matter what happens in my life, I know that I'll never lose my sense of who I am.	1	2	3	4	5	6
8. I tend to distance myself when people get too close to me.	1	2	3	4	5	6
9. I want to live up to my parents' expectations of me.	1	2	3	4	5	6
10. I wish that I weren't so emotional.	1	2	3	4	5	6
11. I usually do not change my behavior simply to please another person.	1	2	3	4	5	6
12. My spouse/partner could not tolerate it if I were to express to him/her my true feelings about some things.	1	2	3	4	5	6
13. When my spouse/partner criticizes me, it bothers me for days.	1	2	3	4	5	6
14. At times my feelings get the best of me and I have trouble thinking clearly.	1	2	3	4	5	6

15. When I am having an argument with someone, I can separate my thoughts about the issue from my feelings about the person.	1	2	3	4	5	6
16. I'm often uncomfortable when people get too close to me.	1	2	3	4	5	6
17. I feel a need for approval from virtually everyone in my life.	1	2	3	4	5	6
18. At times I feel as if I'm riding an emotional roller-coaster.	1	2	3	4	5	6
19. There's no point in getting upset about things I cannot change.	1	2	3	4	5	6
20. I'm concerned about losing my independence in intimate relationships.	1	2	3	4	5	6
21. I'm overly sensitive to criticism.	1	2	3	4	5	6
22. I try to live up to my parents' expectations.	1	2	3	4	5	6
23. I'm fairly self-accepting.	1	2	3	4	5	6
24. I often feel that my spouse/partner wants too much from me.	1	2	3	4	5	6
25. I often agree with others just to appease them.	1	2	3	4	5	6
26. If I have had an argument with my spouse/partner, I tend to think about it all day.	1	2	3	4	5	6
27. I am able to say "no" to others even when I feel pressured by them.	1	2	3	4	5	6
28. When one of my relationships becomes very intense, I feel the urge to run away from it.	1	2	3	4	5	6
29. Arguments with my parent(s) or sibling(s) can still make me feel awful.	1	2	3	4	5	6
30. If someone is upset with me, I can't seem to let it go easily.	1	2	3	4	5	6
31. I'm less concerned that others approve of me than I am in doing what I think is right.	1	2	3	4	5	6
32. I would never consider turning to any of my family members for emotional support.	1	2	3	4	5	6
33. I often feel unsure when others are not around to help me make a decision.	1	2	3	4	5	6
34. I'm very sensitive to being hurt by others.	1	2	3	4	5	6
35. My self-esteem really depends on how others think of me.	1	2	3	4	5	6
36. When I'm with my spouse/partner, I often feel smothered.	1	2	3	4	5	6
37. When making decisions, I seldom worry about what others will think.	1	2	3	4	5	6
38. I often wonder about the kind of impression I create.	1	2	3	4	5	6
39. When things go wrong, talking about them usually makes it worse.	1	2	3	4	5	6
40. I feel things more intensely than others do.	1	2	3	4	5	6
41. I usually do what I believe is right regardless of what others say.	1	2	3	4	5	6
42. Our relationship might be better if my spouse/partner would give me the space I need.	1	2	3	4	5	6
43. I tend to feel pretty stable under stress.	1	2	3	4	5	6
44. Sometimes I feel sick after arguing with my spouse/partner.	1	2	3	4	5	6
45. I feel it's important to hear my parents' opinions before making decisions.	1	2	3	4	5	6
46. I worry about people close to me getting sick, hurt, or upset.	1	2	3	4	5	6

DSI-R Subscale Composition: (underlined means reverse scored)

Emotional Reactivity: 1, 6, 10, 14, 18, 21, 26, 30, 34, 38, 40;

"I" Position: 4, 7, 11, 15, 19, 23, 27, 31, 35, 41, 43;

Emotional Cutoff: 2, 3, 8, 12, 16, 20, 24, 28, 32, 36, 39, 42;

Fusion with Others: 5, 9, 13, 17, 22, 25, 29, 33, 37, 44, 45, 46.

*Note.* The items for all of the subscales except the revised Fusion with Others subscale are from "The Differentiation of Self Inventory: Development and initial validation," by E. A. Skowron and M. L. Friedlander, 1998, *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 45, p. 246. Copyright 1998 by the American Psychological Association. Reprinted with permission.

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