THE DEGREE OF SIMILARITY OF DIFFERENTIATION OF SELF BETWEEN PARTNERS IN MARRIED AND DATING COUPLES: PRELIMINARY EVIDENCE

Suzanne E. Bartle

ABSTRACT: Bowen's differentiation of self construct is examined through a test in two studies of the hypothesis that people select partners at similar levels of differentiation of self. One study used a sample of married couples and the other a sample of dating and engaged couples. The studies used different instruments for determining differentiation of self. Three data analysis procedures—correlations, t-tests, and the degree of similarity procedure—provided conflicting evidence for the similarity hypothesis. Results are discussed as they pertain to statistical analysis issues using related individuals and to Bowen family systems theory and the use of this theory in clinical practice.

The purpose of this paper is to present preliminary data from two studies to test Bowen's (1976, 1978) hypothesis that individuals tend to select mates at the same level of self-differentiation as themselves. Three analysis procedures are presented to illustrate the complexities of testing an hypothesis of similarity between related individuals. The results of these two studies incorporating three indicators of self-differentiation will be reported. A brief background of Bowen's Family System theory is presented to provide the context in which the results will be discussed.

Suzanne E. Bartle, PhD, is an assistant professor in human relations and family development, The Ohio State University, 315A Campbell Hall, 1787 Neil Avenue, Columbus, OH 43210.

Contemporary Family Therapy, 15(6), December 1993
© 1993 Human Sciences Press, Inc.
The cornerstone of Bowen's work is the differentiation of self construct. Bowen (1978) describes the construct as the degree of fusion or differentiation between emotional and intellectual functioning. At the one end of the continuum, thoughts and feelings are fused to the point that the person is dominated by the automatic emotional system. This individual is highly emotionally reactive. Emotional reactivity is manifest in three general behavioral tendencies: withdrawal, counter-attack, and defend-self (Bowen, 1978). At the other end of the differentiation of self continuum, thoughts and feelings are separated or differentiated enough to allow the individual not to be dominated by the automatic emotional system. This differentiation does not suggest that the individual no longer feels, but rather that the individual no longer reacts solely based on feelings. These individuals are less emotionally reactive and can take an "I" position in relationships (Bowen, 1978). Maintaining an "I" position entails stating one's opinion or belief clearly while still maintaining contact with the emotional system. Thus, the well differentiated person is able to live in a self-directed way, and still be aware of and choose to make contact with the relationship systems that surround him or her (Bowen, 1976, 1978; Friedman, 1991; Kerr, 1981, 1984).

Bowen (1976, 1978) suggests that the degree of differentiation of self is determined by the time an individual leaves his or her family of origin and attempts a life of his or her own. "Thereafter, he tends to replicate the life-style from the parental family in all future relationships" (Bowen, 1978; p. 74). Thus, according to Bowen (1978) the family system that is created by two people joining and having children of their own becomes a replication of previous generations, in that the future generations will replicate similar patterns of behavior.

Bowen (1978) makes the assumption that people create new family systems by choosing partners who have the same level of differentiation as themselves. The lower the level of differentiation of the spouses, the more likely the two will fuse in the relationship. This tendency toward fusion is even stronger under stress (Bowen, 1976; Kerr, 1981), creating the possibility for "dysfunction." The dysfunction is manifest in one of three ways, marital conflict, dysfunction in one or both spouses, or projection onto one or more children. This family projection process is used as a way to deflect the fusion in the parental relationship, which has created anxiety.

For families in which differentiation is higher, the couple does not experience as great a tendency toward fusion, both partners are