

Maturation in the Indian Context: An Exploration of Differentiation of Self in Indian Youth

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Abstract

Murray Bowen's 'Differentiation of Self' refers to a maturation process wherein the individual can achieve an optimal balance between the biologically rooted dialectic forces of togetherness and separateness. Being a multigenerational process, differentiation is achieved within the context of the family's emotional process and manifests in the intrapsychic and interpersonal domains of functioning. Higher levels of differentiation facilitate better psychological health, and lower levels leave the person vulnerable to psychological distress. While extensively explored in the West, there is a paucity of differentiation studies in India, which is a collectivistic society characterised by psychological interdependence.

An online cross-sectional survey was conducted to explore differentiation among Indian youth enrolled in universities across Maharashtra, India, using the DSI-R (Differentiation of Self-Revised) (Skowron & Schmitt, 2003). Data collected from 783 youth (243 males, 540 females; mean age = 20.77 years) was analysed using non-parametric statistics. Findings indicated average levels of differentiation ($M=3.4$, $SD=0.59$), high levels of I-Position ($M=4.1$, $SD=0.77$) and Emotional Reactivity ($M=2.8$, $SD=0.95$), and average levels of Emotional Cutoff ($M=3.7$, $SD=0.91$) and Fusion with others ($M=3$, $SD=0.7$). Contrary to Bowen's assertion of the universality of the construct, sociodemographic factors like gender, birth order, relationship status and parental education were found to influence differentiation levels of youth significantly. Existing data provides contradicting evidence of the same. Findings support the need for more multicultural studies of differentiation to understand the construct and its manifestation in different cultures. Implications for assessment and therapeutic interventions are discussed.

Introduction

Youth is associated with many inescapable physiological changes and several imperceptible yet influential psychological and social transformations which impact the individual, family and society. The concept of youth itself has varied definitions, as well as historical and spatial implications. Agencies such as the UNFPA (United Nations Population Fund, 2007), WHO (World Health Organization, 2014) and GoI (Government of India in its National Youth Policy, 2003) have not converged on the same age bracket for youth. Some cultures recognise this transition to occur when young people become financially independent and enter the labour force, regardless of chronological age. So also, being a young person in India is different from being a young person in the USA in terms of factors like the preferred place of stay, level of independence, responsibilities, expectations and identity, to name a few. In individualistic cultures, the responsibility to transition to adulthood is primarily in oneself, while in more relationship-oriented societies, youth may receive more direction and support from social institutions (Arnett, 1999). Social, economic and other contextual influences impinge upon the individual's experience of being a young person. Regardless, this life stage is associated with maturation and independence, which contributes to positive mental health outcomes if accomplished with relative success. Conversely, failure to achieve developmental markers has a deleterious impact on individuals with ripple effects over the course of their lifetime.

Many theorists have conceptualised the developmental tasks of this stage in different ways. For instance, Erickson (1958, 1963) speaks about intrapsychic changes wherein the individual seeks to achieve a sense of identity as well as healthy yet intimate contact with others. Arnett (1999) considers youth to be the most volitional period of life, characterised by fluctuations, reversals and uncertainties, offering the optimum opportunity for identity exploration, character formation, relationship development and commitment, assumption of adult roles and responsibilities, as well as obtaining the education and training that will sustain adult life.

Bowen's Family Systems Theory

Bowen's family systems theory (1978) conceptualises youth as the period when individuals achieve a more developed or differentiated self. Differentiation is a multi-generational process comprising intrapsychic and interpersonal components that equip the individual to balance two dialectical life forces – autonomy and healthy connectedness with others. High levels of differentiation involve the intrapsychic capacity to separate the emotional and intellectual systems so that the individual can act with integrity and authenticity, even in emotionally demanding situations. It also includes the interpersonal ability to achieve healthy autonomy, even as the individual strives for connectedness with others. Personal and social integrity are two aspects of the differentiated self. In people with low levels of differentiation, the thinking system gets flooded with emotions, which often manifests as emotional distress and interpersonal discomfort. Such individuals are emotionally reactive and resort to poor coping mechanisms like fusion or cutoff to manage the emotional overwhelm. Differentiation develops within the emotional field of the family of origin and is influenced by the extent of emotional separation between the family and the individual. It is generally established by late adolescence, remaining relatively unchanged thereafter (Bowen, 1978).

Though Bowen maintained that differentiation could only be measured qualitatively through interviews and observations, subsequent development of tools like Haber's Level of Differentiation of Self Scale (1993), DSI (Differentiation of Self Inventory, (Skowron & Friedlander, 2009) and DSI-R (Differentiation of Self Inventory – Revised, (Skowron & Schmitt, 2003) made it possible to examine Bowen's theoretical postulations empirically. High differentiation has been associated with better adjustment, well-being, interpersonal harmony and marital adjustment (Calatrava et al., 2022; Chung & Gale, 2006; Hooper & Doehler, 2011; Miller et al., 2004; Skowron, 2004). Negative links emerged between high differentiation and anxiety, stress, depression, coping, social adjustment and psychiatric as well as physiological problems (Miller et al., 2004; Murray et al., 2006; Thorberg & Lyvers, 2010; Simons et al., 2013). Thereby, Bowen's stipulation that there exists a relationship between differentiation and psychological health was vindicated empirically. Significantly, the majority of these studies were carried out in the West.

Cross-cultural Research on Differentiation

Cross-Cultural Validity of the Construct. Bowen asserted that differentiation was the individual's ability to balance the dialectic interplay between the need for connectedness and the need for autonomy and was universal in nature (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). However, constructs like autonomy and intimacy are dictated by cultural norms and preferences (Erdem & Safi, 2017; Kagitcibasi, 2005) and have differing effects on people's self-concept (Bekker et al., 2011). The concept of differentiation was developed in the context of Bowen's work with White, middle-class, European American families in the USA. This is also the cultural context where the majority of differentiation studies have been conducted (Calatrava et al., 2022). In the West, individualistic cultural values are prized, and characteristics like assertiveness and psychological separation from the family are fundamental to maturation and identity development. Alternatively, interdependence is of central significance in collectivistic cultures, and Bowen's theory has been critiqued for not adequately considering this (Essandoh, 1995; Tamura & Lau, 1992). Cross-cultural research on differentiation is scant but has reported variations from findings reported in the West. For instance, Chung and Gale (2006) found lower levels of differentiation in Korean students compared to European American students, as did Kim et al. (2015) in their comparison of South Korean and White American students. Other studies also reported similar findings (Alaedein, 2008; Chung & Gale, 2009). This has led researchers to question the extent to which differentiation is relevant to collectivistic cultures (Chung & Gale, 2009; Erdem & Safy, 2018; Kim et al., 2015; Lee, 1998; Rothbaum et al., 2000; Sorokowska et al., 2017).

Validity of Associations. Research has explored the relationship between differentiation and psychological indices, and some findings have been unexpected. For instance, Bowen posited that high levels of differentiation would be associated with better mental health outcomes. The same has been corroborated by many studies in the West (Jankowsky et al., 2013; Skowron et al., 2009; Lampis et al., 2019; Skowron, 2000). Data also favours the association that exists between low levels of differentiation and psychological distress (Murdock & Gore, 2014; Tuason & Friedlander, 2000). However, contrary to Bowen's assertions, Korean students with higher levels of individuation reported low self-esteem. Studies from Taiwan, Thailand and Japan found that high levels of fusion promoted a sense of belongingness and personal identity, both of which had salubrious effects (Bell et al., 2000; Neff et al., 2008). In societies like Korea and Thailand, high connectedness and low separateness were not dysfunctional (Kim et al., 2014; Neff et al., 2008). In order to explain these inconsistencies, it was posited that in specific cultural contexts, some of the desirable characteristics of Bowen's differentiated self (e.g., I Position) might not find as much support, while other characteristics which were considered detrimental to differentiation may find active encouragement during the socialisation process and contribute to better well-being (e.g., fusion with others) (Chung & Gale, 2009; Chun & Macdermid, 1997; Tuason & Friedlander, 2000). This indicates that differentiation may be subject to cultural norms, and the definition of healthy differentiation may be culturally laden (Erdem & Safy, 2018).

Cross-Cultural Validity of Tools. A related issue concerns using culturally appropriate psychometric tools to measure differentiation in discrete populations. Despite the growing number of studies on Bowen's Family Systems Theory (FST) and the variety of tools available to measure the constructs, several researchers have acknowledged the lack of cultural, gender, ethnic and racial sensitivity of these

measures (Tuason & Friedlander, 2000; Skowron & Schmitt, 2003). In the case of the DSI, which is the most validated and widely used tool for measuring differentiation, the authors (Skowron and Friedlander, 1998) pointed out that the tool was normed on white, employed, middle-class, and married participants. This led researchers like Kudo (2018) to question the transcultural validity of such measures in cultures like Japan. In 2003, the DSI was revised to improve the validity of one of its subscales and the DSI-R was developed (Skowron & Schmitt, 2003). But, O'Hara and Meteyard (2011) noted the weaker construct validity of the revised DSI scale and attributed this to its cultural bias.

Further, various studies have been conducted in non-English speaking countries like China, Japan, the Middle East, Turkey, Israel and Italy, where difficulties were encountered while collecting data using the DSI-R. These studies have indicated that the terms used are differently understood and interpreted by people from non-Western cultures. The Fusion with Others (FO) subscale has been particularly vulnerable to varying interpretations due to the differing nature of family relationships in various cultures (Chung & Gale, 2006; Kim et al., 2015; Lampis et al., 2019; Lam & Chan-So, 2013). In 2015, Rodriguez-Gonzalez and others conducted a study of Spanish adult participants after translating and back-translating the DSI-R and found that only two of the four subscales (Emotional Reactivity and Emotional Cutoff) were valid. Lampis et al. (2017) and Işık & Bulduk (2015) adapted the DSI-R to Italian and Turkish languages and found the tool reliable with these populations, though the FO subscale was still problematic in these contexts. Thus, inconclusive and mixed findings have emerged from several cross-cultural studies, making it difficult to draw definite conclusions regarding the universality of Bowen's construct of differentiation and the validity of tools used to measure it (Lampis et al., 2019). Such varying findings prompted Skowron and others (2014) to state that although Bowen's concept has similar aspects across cultures, how it manifests depends on the cultural context in which the individual is embedded.

At the time of writing this article, no results showed up while searching for a study that measured differentiation of self in Indian youth (whether using the DSI-R or other validated tools like the DSI-SF (DSI-Short Form), MDSI (Multicultural Differentiation of Self Inventory)). Hence, it may be concluded that there is a dearth of differentiation studies among Indian youth.

The Indian Cultural Context

Contemporary Indian society is a blend of collectivistic and individualistic tendencies. Even though large-scale sociocultural changes have recently raised questions regarding the extent to which modernisation has contributed to Westernization, Indians still prize their core collectivistic family values (Naidu & Mahabeer, 2006; Sinha et al., 2001; Tripathi, 1988). Family bonds are characterised by strong intergenerational proximity and solidarity, and individuals continue to reside with aged parents well into adulthood and sometimes even after marriage. Indian families are psychologically interdependent, and aspects of collectivism have a bearing on value orientations in Indian families, contributing to its patriarchal nature and high emphasis on filial piety (Kagitcibasi, 2005; Mishra et al., 2005; Rao et al., 2003; Sonawat, 2001). Within the country, various factors like the levels of urbanisation, affluence,

geopolitical and psychosocial characteristics have been found to influence the cultural orientation of the people, leading to greater individualistic orientation in more urbanised cities and towns when compared to less urbanised towns and rural areas (Jha & Singh, 2011; Sinha et al., 2001). Another noteworthy characteristic here is the high level of tightness (score of 11.0) surrounding norms and a low tolerance for norm deviance, which correspondingly influences social institutions, child-rearing practices, and people's behaviours and thought processes (Gelfand et al., 2011).

Although there are studies that explore the cultural context and nature of families in India, there is little evidence of studies of differentiation conducted in the Indian context. The above sociocultural attributes are quite distinct from those of the population on which Bowen's FST (Family Systems Theory) was constructed. This mandated the validation of Bowen's construct from emic (within culture) perspectives (Miller et al., 2004). In response to recent calls for expanding the premise and clinical applications of Bowen's FST, assessing the applicability of Bowen's FST to Indian youth using the most structured and popularly used tool of measurement (DSI-R) would help understand the transcultural validity of the tool (Erdem & Safi, 2018). Findings would also make it possible to ascertain if emerging data aligns with findings from other collectivistic contexts. Hence the need to measure differentiation in Indian youth using the DSI-R.

Differentiation and Contextual Factors

Research on the effect of contextual factors on differentiation is limited yet crucial. According to Bowen, the basic level of differentiation is well established by adolescence and remains fixed thereafter. Some changes may be brought about in it through self-sustained, independent living as well as unusual life experiences or therapeutic efforts to increase differentiation (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). However, research indicates the influence of various contextual factors on differentiation, although findings lack consistency. There is some evidence of higher age being associated with lower levels of reactivity and fusion (Skowron et al., 2003; Skowron & Friedlander, 1998). Even though Bowen considered differentiation to be gender-neutral, some studies have reported gender differences in differentiation (Skowron et al., 2003; Güler & Karaca, 2021), while others have reported none (Hooper & Depuy, 2010; Skowron et al., 2004). Birth position has been linked to certain personality types by Bowen, who held that emotional processes within the family are impacted by the sibling positions of the individual (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). But there is little data regarding the effect of birth position on differentiation (Miller et al., 2004). Romantic attachment plays a critical role in the lives of youth (Erikson, 1963). Bowen speaks about life forces of individuality and togetherness as being biologically rooted, and maintains that the amount of life energy invested in relationships depends on the differentiation level of the person, indicating perhaps that differentiation levels could influence the level of commitment in romantic attachments. This needs to be verified. Basic differentiation is essentially a multigenerational emotional process. As parental attitudes and behaviours are influenced by their level of education and occupation, it was posited that parents with higher levels of education and occupational backgrounds would be better

differentiated and have better-differentiated children. There is little research data to back this hypothesis. The present study sought to address the above gaps in literature.

Methodology

Location of the Study

The study was conducted in the state of Maharashtra, and the sample was drawn from youth staying in the cities of Mumbai, Thane and Pune. It is relevant to note that Mumbai is a metropolis and the financial capital of India. It is a city of immigrants, where an eclectic mix of people from various strata, states of origin, linguistic backgrounds, cultural contexts and communities live together. Students from all over India enrol for courses in universities in Mumbai, contributing to the cultural, linguistic and religious diversity of these knowledge centres.

Sampling

The current study is a part of the author's doctoral thesis, which explores differentiation and depression in Indian youth. A cross-sectional survey was carried out to collect data pertaining to the differentiation of self. Data collection happened in November 2020, when the national lockdown that was initiated in March 2020 in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic was still in place. Convenient snowball sampling was used, and youth aged 19-25 years and enrolled for any full-time course in universities across Mumbai, Thane and Pune were sent the online form for data collection. Only those students who had access to a stable internet connection and were fairly conversant with English formed the participant pool of the study. It is relevant to mention that during this time, classes were being conducted online and access to internet connections and smartphones was more common than before the pandemic. Participants received the opt-in form through social media groups, primarily WhatsApp, and were invited to voluntarily self-administer the form. It was mandatory to respond to all items in order to make a successful submission.

Ethical Considerations

According to Jain and colleagues (2017), mental health researchers in India must consider several issues that persistently dogged psychology research. This includes problems related to diagnosis, stigma and bias, myths regarding mental health and the lack of ethical rigour. The Institutional Review Board of Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, inspected the ethical soundness of the study and approved the same. When participants received the opt-in form, they were informed about the objectives, purpose and usefulness of the study. Following this, if they chose to participate in the study, they were provided access to a self-care kit that contained important information regarding depression (which is a part of the doctoral thesis and therefore, of the data collection tools) as well as resources they could access in case of need. Only after this step was consent taken for participating in the study. At the data analysis stage,

all participant identification information was anonymised, and care was taken to ensure that confidentiality was maintained throughout the analysis and reporting process.

Tools

The study aimed to measure differentiation and explore its association with contextual factors.

Demographic Information Form. This part of the form collected information about the participant's characteristics such as age, gender, educational and relationship status, period of stay in a hostel, parental education and employment status. Table 1 provides details of the sociodemographic data that was collected from participants.

Table 1 Socio-Demographic Data Collected in the Study

Gender	Male, Female
Education	Professional, Post-graduation, Graduation, Higher Secondary (Grade 11 & 12), Secondary School (Grade 10)
Birth Position	Single, Youngest, Oldest, Somewhere in the middle
Relationship Status	Single, Casual Relationship, Committed Relationship
Stayed in a Hostel Facility	Yes, No
Period of Stay in Hostel	Number of months
Educational Level of each parent	Schooling, Graduate, Post-graduate
Occupation of each parent	Self-employed, Employed, Unemployed, Retired (in case of mothers – Homemaker)

Differentiation of Self Inventory – Revised (DSI-R). Differentiation of self (DoS) was measured using the DSI-R by Skowron and Schmitt (2003), which is a revised version of the DSI developed by Skowron and Friedlander (1998). The DSI-R assesses differentiation by measuring four core constructs, two each measuring interpersonal (Emotional Cutoff and Emotional Reactivity) and intrapsychic (I Position and Fusion with Others) differentiation. Emotional Reactivity (ER), assessed using an 11-item subscale, explores a person's tendency to react to situations through autonomic responses like flooding and hypersensitivity (Eg: "I wish that I weren't so emotional"). The Emotional Cutoff (EC) subscale is made up of 12 items and assesses a person's fear of being emotionally overwhelmed by close relationships (Eg: "I'm often uncomfortable when people get too close to me"). Both of these scales are reverse scored, so higher scores indicate low ER and low EC, both indicators of high differentiation. The I-Position (IP) subscale is an 11-item measurement of one's ability to be an authentic and integrated self when facing challenging situations (Eg: "There's no point in getting upset about things I cannot change"). Higher

scores are indicative of better differentiation. Finally, the Fusion with Others (FO) subscale consists of 12 items. High scores, indicative of high differentiation, is a measure of the ability to take a balanced, well-thought-out position regarding one's values, beliefs and expectations rather than over-identifying and introjecting parental values (Eg: "Arguments with my parents or siblings can still make me feel awful"). The FO scale is also reverse scored so that higher scores indicate low fusion levels and, therefore, higher differentiation. The DSI-R has a total of 46 items and is a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 1= "not at all true of me" to 6= "very true of me". To get the total score, raw scores are totalled and divided by six, so that levels of differentiation lie between 1 and 6, with higher scores reflecting higher differentiation (low emotional reactivity, low emotional cut-off, low fusion with others and high assertiveness). The DSI-R has a Cronbach's alpha of .92 for the full scale and a range of .81 to .89 for the subscales, demonstrating an acceptable level of internal consistency (Skowron & Schmitt, 2006).

Data Validation Check: Data for this study was collected online. Hence, it was important to integrate seriousness checks into the survey to improve data validity (Aust et al., 2013). Care was taken to circulate the form within student groups and teacher/professor groups alone so that accessibility could be limited to students across Mumbai, Thane and Pune. As participants could submit the form only after they had responded to all questions, the survey was free of non-responses. As participants were uniquely identified using their email addresses while submitting the forms, multiple submissions from the same email address was disallowed. There is some evidence that the time taken to respond to tools may also impact validity (Ward & Pond, 2015). A pilot study was conducted in order to understand participant experiences of responding to the survey. Based on their feedback, it was understood that the time taken to complete the current survey was 20-30 minutes, and the form was not experienced as being too long. To ensure quick and accurate understanding of items in the form, care was taken to explain the meanings of difficult words within brackets so that participants do not answer carelessly or in ignorance (Eg: 'I often agree with others just to appease them' (Appease = please, make someone happy)). During data analyses, the consistency and plausibility of responses in the demographic information part of the form was checked first. This was to identify any implausible combinations of age, education level and period of hostel stay sets. Additionally, it was seen that there were no responses that had recorded an implausible mobile number (e.g., all 0s or all 1s etc.). Responses were also checked to identify any atypical patterns like similar, extreme or neutral responses for all questions. No such response was found,

Data Analysis. SPSS version 21.0 helped to analyse data. Descriptive statistics and Correlation coefficients were used to represent and explore the levels of differentiation. Mean, standard deviations and ranges of differentiation (and its domains) are presented in Table 2. Sociodemographic data relevant to literature on differentiation was included in the analysis. Chi-square tests of independence were carried out at a P value of <.05 (95% confidence interval) to understand the interrelationships between contextual factors and differentiation.

Results

At the end of the online survey, 788 responses were recorded. Of these, only 785 forms were filled out entirely, and 3 participants opted out of the survey before signing the consent form. Among the rest, two respondents had indicated their gender as "Other" from the available options ("Male", "Female" and "Other"). Since the number of such participants (n=2) was not representative of this population, these responses were left out of the analysis. Hence, a total of 783 youth who identified themselves either as "male" or "female" and fell into the age bracket of 19-25 years made up the study sample. Of these, 243 participants (31%) were males, and 540 (69%) were females. The mean age recorded was 20.77 years. Table 2 presents other information related to the sociodemographic profile of the sample.

Table 2 Sociodemographic Information of Sample (n=783)

Characteristic	(n)	(%)
Birth Position		
Youngest	263	33.6
Single	143	18.3
Middle	68	8.7
Oldest	309	39.5
Level of Education		
SSc_10	3	0.4
HSc_12	273	34.9
Graduate	365	46.6
Post-Grad	87	11.1
Professional	55	7.0
Relationship Status		
Single	550	70.2
Casual	39	5.0
Committed	194	24.8
Hostel Stay Period		
0-3 Months	509	65
3-12 months	95	12.1
12-24 Months	78	10
24-36 Months	55	7
36 Months +	46	5.9
Father's Education & Occupation		
FatherSchool	254	32.4
FatherGrad	330	42.1
FatherPostGrad	199	25.4
FatherUnempl	23	2.9
FatherSelfEmp	312	39.8
FatherEmpl	375	47.9

FatherRetired	73	9.3
Mother's Education & Occupation		
MotherSchool	294	37.5
MotherGrad	327	41.8
MotherPostGrad	162	20.7
MotherUnempl	8	1.0
MotherSelfEmp	91	11.6
MotherEmpl	177	22.6
MotherRetired	16	2.0
MotherHomeMkr	491	62.7

Before proceeding to analyse the data, normality testing was done. Due to the large sample size, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was used to assess any deviation from normality. DoS and its components were not normally distributed, with p values being less than 0.05 ($p=0.000$). Hence, differences between differentiation of self and contextual factors like age, gender, relational status, hostel stay, birth order, parental education and parental occupation were assessed using the Kruskal-Wallis test of comparison and the Mann-Whitney U test at P value <0.05 .

Descriptive Statistics

As seen in Table 3, the study found an average level of DoS in Indian youth, with a mean DoS score of 3.4 ($SD=0.59$). Indian youth were found to have a high level of ER (low mean of 2.8, indicating high levels of emotional reactivity) and IP (mean =4.1). EC and FO were average, with a mean of 3 and 3.7, respectively (Table 3).

Table 3 Differentiation of Self Scores

Domain	Range	Mean	S.D
ER (M)	1.0-5.8	3.12	0.995
ER (W)	1.0-4.2	2.67	0.902
ER(Tot)	1.0-5.8	2.8	0.95
IP (M)	1.6-6.0	4.27	0.77
IP (W)	1.6-6.0	4.07	0.76
IP(Tot)	1.6-6.0	4.1	0.77
EC(M)	1.2-5.8	3.74	0.92
EC(W)	1.4-5.8	3.72	0.91
EC(Tot)	1.2-5.8	3.7	0.91
FO(M)	1.4-5.7	3.12	0.74
FO(W)	1.4-4.9	2.96	0.675
FO(Tot)	1.4-5.7	3	0.7
DoS (M)	2.1-5.0	3.56	0.611
DoS(W)	1.6-4.9	3.36	0.567
DoS(Tot)	1.6-5.0	3.4	0.59
M (Males) =243, F (Females) =540, N=783; Tot=Total			

Differentiation of Self and Contextual Factors

Gender. The sample was made up of 540 women and 243 men. The Mann-Whitney U test found significant relations between gender and overall DoS as well as most of its sub-domains, namely ER, IP and FO (Table 4). Men had higher means than women in DoS, ER, IP and FO, showing that they were significantly more differentiated than women, less emotionally reactive, less fused (higher scores indicating lower levels of EC and FO) and more assertive (high IP) than women. Women were more emotionally cut off than men though the difference was not statistically significant.

Table 4. Differentiation of Self and Gender

	ER_Tot	IP_Tot	EC_Tot	FO_Tot	Diff_Total
Mann-Whitney U	48533	55860.5	64472	57425	53492.5
Wilcoxon W	194603	201930.5	210542	203495	199562.5
Z	-5.836	-3.333	-0.389	-2.799	-4.144
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	*.000	*0.001	0.697	*0.005	*.000

*Significant at the $p < .05$ level

Age. In order to understand the relationship between age and DoS, participants were categorised year-wise into seven categories, like "19", "20" and so on until "25". The Kruskal-Wallis test returned no significant association between age and DoS or its subscales.

Birth Position. Participants were divided into categories based on their birth position, like so: "Single Child" (N=143), "Youngest" (N=263), "Middle" (N=68) and "Oldest" (N=309) (Table 2). A significant relation was flagged by the Kruskal-Wallis test (Chi-square = 9.408, $p = .024$, $df = 3$) at $p < .05$ for EC. The pair-wise comparison indicated that the means were different across the "Youngest", "Middle" and "Single" categories for EC. This indicated that single children were significantly less cutoff when compared to middle and youngest-born children (Tables 5 & 6).

Table 5. Differentiation Across Birth Order

	ER_Tot	IP_Tot	EC_Tot	FO_Tot	DoS
Kruskal-Wallis H	4.219	.219	9.408	2.122	3.581
df	3	3	3	3	3
Asymp. Sig.	.239	.975	*.024	.548	.310

Table 6. Ranks Across Birth Order

	Birth Position	Mean Rank
EC_Tot	Youngest	385.59
	Single	433.57
	Middle	334.84
	Oldest	390.80

Period of Hostel Stay. Bowen maintained that the level of differentiation changes slowly and only after an extended period of independent living. To explore any relation between the period of hostel stay and DoS, participants were divided into two categories: "NoHostel" (those with three months or less stay in a hostel,

ever in their lifetime) and “Hostel” (those who had stayed in a hostel for more than three months, ever in their lifetime) (Table 2). It was important to include a period of up to 3 months of hostel stay in the “NoHostel” category because students who may have started staying in hostels at the beginning of the academic year would have returned home due to the COVID 19 national lockdown, but would have stayed only for a period of time that was not long enough to influence their differentiation levels. There were 485 participants in the ‘NoHostel’ category and 298 participants in the “Hostel” category. The Wilcoxon Rank Sum Test indicated a significant difference between groups in the overall DoS as well as EC and FO components of the DSI-R. Mean Ranks of groups showed that those who had stayed in hostels had significantly higher levels of differentiation and lower levels of EC and FO when compared to those with no hostel stay (Table 7).

Table 7. Differentiation and Period of Hostel Stay

	ER_Tot	IP_Tot	EC_Tot	FO_Tot	DoS
Mann-Whitney U	68878.5	72156	65004	63393	65011.5
Wilcoxon W	186733.5	190011	182859	181248	182866.5
Z	-1.103	-0.036	-2.365	-2.891	-2.364
Asym. Sig. (2-tailed)	0.270	0.972	*0.018	*0.004	*0.018

Educational Status of Participants. The sample was divided on the basis of their level of education into several groups, namely “SSc” (those with schooling only, N=3), “HSc” (those who had completed 12th grade, N=273), “Graduate” (those with graduation in any stream, N=365), “PG” (Post-graduation in any stream, N= 87) and “Professional” (with a professional degree, N=55) (Table 2). The Kruskal-Wallis test flagged a significant difference in ER levels (Table 8). Mean ranks showed that emotional reactivity was significantly lower among professionals when compared to the other groups.

Table 8. Differentiation Across Level of Education of Participants

	ER_Tot	IP_Tot	EC_Tot	FO_Tot	DoS
Kruskal-Wallis H	9.751	.863	5.846	2.311	7.088
df	4	4	4	4	4
Asymp. Sig.	*.045	.930	.211	.679	.131

Relationship Status of Participants. Based on the nature of the intimate relationship reported by participants, they were categorised into three groups, namely “Single” (N=550), “Casual” (N=39) and “Committed” (N=194) (Table 2). There emerged differences across categories of relationship status in two domains, namely overall DoS and EC (Table 9). Pairwise comparison (Table 10) revealed that EC was significantly higher in those who were not in any relationship (mean rank=348.38) when compared to

those in casual (mean rank=434.81) or committed relationships (mean rank=507.05). Similarly, those in committed relationships (mean rank=448.52) were more differentiated than those who were single (mean rank=369.72).

Table 9. Differentiation Across Relational Status

	ER_Tot	IP_Tot	EC_Tot	FO_Tot	DoS
Kruskal-Wallis H	1.018	1.541	72.159	3.687	18.334
df	2	2	2	2	2
Asymp. Sig.	.601	.463	*.000	.158	*.000

Table 10. Pairwise Comparison Across Relationship Status

	EC			DoS		
Sample 1-Sample 2	Test Statistic	Std. Error	Sig.	Test Statistics	Std. Error	Sig.
Single-Casual	-86.4	37.451	*.021	-55.37	37.43	.417
Single-Committed	-158.67	18.872	*.000	-78.8	18.86	*.000
Casual-Committed	-72.24	39.661	.069	-23.43	39.64	1.000

Parental Occupation and Education of Participants. The educational status of the father and mother was considered separately, wherein they were categorised as having completed three levels of education: "School", "Graduate" or "Post Graduate". Significant relation emerged between levels of parental (father and mother taken separately) education and differentiation (Table 11).

Table 11. Differentiation Across Levels of Education of Fathers and Mothers

		ER_Tot	IP_Tot	EC_Tot	FO_Tot	DoS
Father	Kruskal-Wallis H	4.352	.395	18.285	8.403	12.723
	df	2	2	2	2	2
	Asymp. Sig.	.114	.821	*.000	*.015	*.002
Mother	Kruskal-Wallis H	.514	1.803	10.866	6.654	4.879
	df	2	2	2	2	2
	Asymp. Sig.	.773	.406	*.004	*.036	.087

Pairwise comparison showed differences in mean ranks. Fathers who had completed only schooling had lower means for overall DoS, EC and FO (350.5, 342.89, 358.77) when compared to those with graduate

(410.57, 410, 404) or post-graduate (414.18, 424.79, 414.45) degrees. This indicated that those whose fathers had completed only schooling were less differentiated, more emotionally cutoff and fused than others. Differences in means were observed across the level of education of mothers. Those whose mothers were only school-educated were more emotionally reactive and fused (359.43, 365.14) when compared to those with graduation (404.08, 408.08) and post-graduation (426.73, 408.27).

In order to assess if there would still be differences in differentiation if any one parent had only schooling, but the other parent was a graduate or post-graduate, parents were categorised into two groups: cases, where both parents had completed only "School" level education, were grouped as "Not Graduate" (N=195). In case any one or both parents were graduates or post-graduates, such participants were grouped in the "Graduate" category (N=588). Significant differences emerged between these groups. Pairwise comparison showed that those participants in the "Not Graduate" groups (that is, no parent is a graduate or post-graduate) were less differentiated (mean ranks: 348.31, 406.49), more emotionally cutoff (mean ranks: 330.58, 412.37) and more fused (mean ranks: 346.84, 406.98) than those in the "Graduate" group. No significant differences emerged in the differentiation of groups based on the nature of parental occupation (Table 12).

Table 12. Differentiation Across Parental Education Level

	ER_Tot	IP_Tot	EC_Tot	FO_Tot	DoS
Mann-Whitney U	54004	54365	45352.5	48523.5	48810.5
Wilcoxon W	73114	227531	64462.5	67633.5	67920.5
Z	-1.216	-1.084	-4.379	-3.222	-3.117
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.224	.278	*.000	*.001	*.002

Discussion

The aim of this descriptive, cross-sectional study was to assess the level of differentiation in Indian youth (19-25 years) enrolled for a full-time course in any university in the state of Maharashtra through the self-administration of the DSI-R, as well as assess the influence of contextual factors on differentiation. Results provided empirical evidence of the applicability of Bowen's construct in the Indian population and demonstrated the influence of key contextual factors.

Level of Differentiation of Self

When compared to studies from the West, the current study recorded average levels of differentiation in Indian youth. Empirical evidence has repeatedly established the inescapable influence of sociocultural conditioning on people's self-construal (Hofstede, 2010; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1989, Yang, 1981). Although Bowen considered DoS to be stable across cultures, studies from collectivistic cultures

have consistently reported lower levels of differentiation and higher emotional reactivity when compared to Western studies (Table 13). A suggested explanation is that interdependent self-construal contributes to a heightened need for fulfilling group obligations, greater sensitivity to social cues and social connectedness, making such individuals prone to emotional reactivity and fusion. India is considered to be more collectivistic than individualistic, and therefore high on the interdependent self-construal (Hofstede, 1980; Verma, 1999). Moving away from a dichotomous framework of self-construal, Kagitcibasi (2007) and others (Mishra et al., 2005a) have posited that urban areas in countries like India (which are transitioning from an agrarian to developed economies) are high in emotional interdependence, giving rise to the autonomous related self which prizes autonomy as well as close interpersonal relationships with family members. Rural areas in India, on the other hand, are high on interdependence, giving rise to the heteronomous related self where obedience orientation and relatedness tend to be prioritised. Ideologies like filial piety that exist here encourage emotional connectedness to an influential elder, making it a protective factor in the individual's life, contributing to greater fusion with them. Due to the above factors, it may stand to reason that lower levels of differentiation recorded by the current study indicate the relatedness orientation of Indian society. This supports existing data that differentiation is more valued in societies that are high in individualism, while relatedness is more valued in societies that are high in collectivism (Chung & Gale, 2009). Ross and Murdock's finding that interdependent self-construal is inversely related to differentiation levels also find validation through the current findings. Studies like these provide evidence to support the proposition that a culture-relativist paradigm could explain the pattern of high levels of differentiation in the West when compared to those in collectivistic contexts (Tuason & Friedlander, 2000).

Table 13. Comparison of DoS in College Students Across Studies

Place	*Ind Score	Age (yrs)	ER	EC	FO	IP	DoS	Author
US	91	Mean=22	3.11	4.47	2.6	4.06	3.56	Skowron et al.
US	91	Mean=25	3.39	4.5	3.45	4.18	3.8	Krycak et al.
US	91	17-29	3.49	4.75	3.27	4.10	3.86	Chung & Gale
Israel (Jews)	54	Mean=25	3.99	2.6	3.86	3.89	3.6	Peleh & Rahal
Israel (Arab)	54	Mean=29	3.49	3.07	3.62	4.09	3.6	Peleg & Rahal
Jordan (Arab)	30	18-25	2.61	3.35	2.81	3.60	3.09	Alaedein
S. Korea	18	17-29	2.74	3.81	2.78	3.62	3.21	Chung & Gale
India	48	19-25	2.8	3.7	3	4.1	3.4	Current Study

*Ind Score: Hostefede's (2001) Individualism-collectivism score

Cultural relativism is not limited to between-country differences alone. The cultural kaleidoscope is very diverse and cannot be oversimplified into watertight compartments (Krys et al., 2022). Although the individualism-collectivism binary and the corresponding types of self-construal offer a convenient paradigm to understand differences among people, these conceptualisations rest on the assumption of population homogeneity. It is erroneous to believe that all people who live in collectivistic cultures hold uniformly collectivistic values. People form preferences and attitudes selectively (Lee & Choi, 2005; Singelis & Brown, 1995; Sinha & Tripathi, 1994; Triandis, 1995). Cross-cultural research has noted that collectivism and individualism coexist within cultures and are influenced by a number of factors not limited to geographical locations (Krys et al., 2022; Kagitcibasi, 1990; Triandis, 1993). Further, it has been posited that even within the same person, there exists a well-developed private (independent) self and a collective (interdependent) self, and culture plays a role in fostering one or the other (Cross & Markus, 1991; Singelis, 1994). A more comprehensive and multi-dimensional view of culture must take into consideration within-culture variations in collectivism and individualism. Many cities within Maharashtra, like Mumbai, Thane and Navi Mumbai, are a melting pot of cultural diversities. Mumbai is the financial hub of the nation. The university population in these cities may have much in common with Western youth. This could explain why the level of differentiation recorded by this study is higher than that recorded by studies from other collectivistic contexts like South Korea and Jordan. However, these findings need not be generalisable across the country as research shows that, unlike urban areas where the individualistic cultural orientation is high due to affluence, urbanisation and economic development, collectivistic cultural orientation (and thereby the interdependent self-construal) tends to be more prominent in rural areas of the country (Jha & Singh, 2011; Triandis et al., 1988).

In recent times, the DSI-R is one of the most widely used tools for measuring differentiation. However, it too was normed on a predominantly white population, and the lack of representativeness of participants from diverse gender, culture, ethnic and racial identities has been reported by Skowron and Schmitt (2003). Some researchers also point out the cultural bias in some of the items within the tools and recommend that subscales as well as the items in the scales must be more culturally sensitive (O'Hara & Meteyard, 2011). The average level of DoS reported by the current study may support existing criticism that the DSI-R has an inherent culture bias or that items within the tool are not sufficiently inclusive, thereby limiting its usefulness in diverse populations (Drake, 2011; Jankowsky & Hooper, 2012). Measuring the differentiation levels of a rural sample within India may offer significant insights, as the value orientation in rural India has been found to be more interdependent and collectivistic. Such a comparative study could also help further explore the applicability of Bowen's construct to discrete cultural contexts.

One of the important findings of this study was the high level of assertiveness (IP) reported in Indian youth, which was almost at par with the level of IP recorded in the West. Studies from other collectivistic cultures have reported lower levels of IP (Alaedein, 2008; Chung & Gale, 2006). Findings such as these support data that Indian collectivism has a prominent individualistic streak (Dalal, 1988; Sinha & Tripathi, 1994; Sinha, 1990). Verma (2001) has found evidence that Indian youth tend to be individualistic in their aspirations and achievement concerns and have a high regard for excelling in competition. While they

have a set of cherished values, they seldom act in accordance with them. Instrumental and functional values are the actual guiding principles they live by (Verma, 2001). Indians tend to be oriented towards status, power and prestige (Sinha, 1990). Further, in recent times, youth's increasing exposure to online platforms and media has deepened the intercultural dialogue taking place in an increasingly blended world (Sawyer & Chen, 2012). Situated in such a zeitgeist, cultural transmissions are more rapid than before and can occur vertically, horizontally or obliquely (Ogihara, 2017). The Indian economy has been experiencing invigorated growth, and many areas in India, particularly Mumbai and its neighbours, are rapidly transitioning to highly urbanised societies. Increasing urbanisation and affluence have been known to facilitate greater separation and autonomy, thereby promoting individualistic tendencies and lowering collectivistic orientation in individuals (Kraus et al., 2011; Triandis et al., 1998). Such changes have been seen previously in several traditionally collectivistic societies (like Japan) as they are being observed in many parts of multiethnic India too (Ogihara, 2017; Sharma, 2003). Hence, an average level of differentiation and high IP point to the symbiotic relationship between geo-sociopolitical progress and individualistic tendencies in university students in Maharashtra, India.

The current study reported high emotional reactivity in Indian youth. A high level of ER has been noted in cultures where social harmony is valued over individuation (Alaedein, 2008; Chung & Gale, 2009; Ross & Murdock, 2014; Sinha, 1990). Indian society is collectivistic in social interactions as well as normative (tight) and has been reported to have high emotionality (Sinha, 1990). It has been noted that social embeddedness and adherence to social rules are associated with negative emotions in individuals (Kitayama et al., 1997; Oishi & Diener, 2003). Cross-cultural differences are evident in emotional regulation strategies too, as collectivistic cultures favour emotional suppression more than individualistic cultures (Matsumoto et al., 2008). Emotional regulation through suppression may occur in tight societies as well, where social norms are enforced with greater stringency. High situational constraints are in place to ensure a restricted behavioural range and limited individual discretion. This manifests as increased caution, prevention focus, self-monitoring and an increased sense of duty. The individual may resort to emotional suppression to minimise group disharmony and to avoid censure (Gelfand et al., 2011). Further, it must be pointed out that youth is a life stage when individuals are dealing with multiple stressors like academic and career related challenges, relationship demands and identity issues. This study collected data during the lockdown following the COVID-19 pandemic. During this time, participants were largely in social isolation, confined to their homes and experiencing high exposure to online media. Pandemic related stressors like financial problems and health-related risks too could have contributed to elevated ER, as seen in this study. Empirical data demonstrates elevated levels of psychological distress in Indian youth during the lockdown (Narayanan and Sriram, 2021).

The study found an average level of fusion with others in Indian youth. The average level of FO was contradictory to expectations given that Indian students have been found to be collectivistic in social interactions, maintaining family relationships, respecting hierarchy, dutifulness, cooperation and loyalty, and are expected to conform to expectations of filial piety (Mishra et al., 2005; Verma, 2001). The theory of family change also supports heightened emotional interdependencies within Indian families, even as material interdependency weakens (Mishra et al., 2005). In collectivistic contexts that are high on

interdependent self-construal, greater closeness is reported with family members and greater emphasis is placed on familial closeness (Uskul et al., 2004). These findings emphasise the fact that the desirable degree of proximity in relationships is culturally determined, and what may be considered healthy togetherness in one group may be considered fusion in another. Contradictory findings reported by the current study indicate the need to understand the complex nature of Indian collectivism and the inconsistencies associated with their behaviour and values. Additionally, current findings also add to the ambivalence regarding what the FO scale actually measures – whether it simply measures self-other relationships in certain cultures, rather than over-involvement with others.

Differentiation and Contextual Factors

Contextual factors like gender, birth position, hostel stay, romantic relationship status, education level of participants and parental education exerted an influence on the differentiation levels of participants.

Even though Bowen considered differentiation to be gender-neutral, existing data is somewhat divided on the gender effects of differentiation. Evidence has been found for it (Yavuz Güler & Karaca, 2021; Skowron & Sabatelli, 2003) and against it (Hooper & Depuy, 2010; Skowron, 2004). Current findings add to empirical evidence that men are more differentiated than women (Jankowski & Sandage, 2012; Knauth et al., 2006). Further, it was seen that women were more fused and emotionally reactive than men. Explanations such as sex role socialisation, structural hierarchy within families, and self-in-reactions theory have been employed to shed further light on such differences. In India, families typically follow patriarchal norms. Girls experience greater restrictions in autonomous decision-making and mobility, have limited access to resources, are subject to increased monitoring and control as well as bear the responsibility of protecting the family honour (Basu et al., 2017; Ram et al., 2014). Men, on the other hand, are socialised to self-affirm, recognise and act on their strengths, enjoy greater autonomy, mobility and access to resources. These factors contribute to greater self-esteem in men than women during and after adolescence (Huang, 2010). This may explain why the current study found Indian men to be more differentiated and assertive than Indian women.

It has been pointed out that the gender identity of women is based more on relatedness and connection with others than separation, which leads them to balance separateness and intimacy differently than men (Cross & Madson, 1997). According to family systems theory, development of the intellectual system is considered the cornerstone for differentiation and the differentiated person is able to use the intellectual system to overrule the emotional system when necessary. But maturity in women may be indicated by their ability to integrate the self and the other and being able to stay true to self while being connected to others. Bowen's construct has been criticised for a gender-neutral stance on the process of differentiation, whereas identity formation in men aims to foster a separate self and for women tends to foster a connected self (Knudson-Martin, 1994). Additionally, women are socialised to achieve greater intergenerational intimacy with their families (Skowron et al., 2003; Williamson, 1991). Bowen's theory has been questioned for prescribing that the route to a better-differentiated self is to become more

autonomous by denying or overcoming togetherness needs. In this sense, the salience of connectedness with others is not articulated sufficiently, drawing the criticism that the theory upholds a masculine model of relating to others. Their relational roles and socialisation effects may explain the lower levels of differentiation and higher levels of fusion in Indian women. If so, it is important to expand Bowen's family systems model to aid conceptualisation and intervention that addresses gender differences.

The current study extends further support that greater emotional reactivity is associated with the feminine gender (Peleg & Rahal, 2012; Simon et al., 2019; Skowron & Schmitt, 2003). Research into gender differences in emotions has found that women more than men experience and report negative emotions, and engage more frequently with their negative emotions. There is greater neural activity in women than in men when faced with emotional stimuli (Deng et al., 2016; Gardener et al., 2013; Rueckert et al., 2011). Further, it may be pointed out that patriarchal norms that exist in society often manifest within households as gender-discriminatory practices. Such parenting practices contribute to elevated stress in women, particularly when these practices are contrary to the egalitarian attitudes they hold (Ram et al., 2014), which may also contribute to greater levels of emotionality in them. Significantly, the COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing lockdown have led to mandatory social distancing norms. This too may have intensified the level of monitoring of women and further curtailed their mobility, exacerbating their experience of being controlled while keeping them alienated from easily accessible support systems like peers and teachers (Narayanan & Sriram, 2021). Such factors too may have contributed to elevated stress levels in women when compared to men.

Some of Bowen's propositions are yet to find sufficient research support. His theory of sibling position is one such, wherein he stated that functional birth order positions could be influenced by the family projection process and level of differentiation (Bowen, 1978; Miller et al., 2004). Findings of the current study found that birth order was related to levels of emotional cutoff as single children reported the lowest EC, and middle-born children reported the highest. Birth order research has in general supported that birth order influences personality and posited several plausible reasons. The resource dilution theory states that single children automatically receive exclusive parental care and enjoy the greatest access to the family's resources (Blake 1981; Liu., 2012). Hence, only children naturally have better self-esteem, motivation, interpersonal relationships and performance indices (Liu et al., 2012), which in turn contributes to better emotional regulation in them. Additionally, the demographic transition occurring in many countries of the world wherein parents are opting for 'quality' of children's lives over 'quantity' has led to a proliferation of single children families where the focus is to provide utmost care to their only-born. In such families, parental desire for upward mobility is actualised through higher aspirations for their only child (Basu & Desai, 2016). The family model of psychological interdependence existing in India also places great emotional value on children, leading to more democratic interactions with them (Kagiticbasi, 2005). Current findings provide more evidence that the changing nature of the family environment has a beneficial effect on only children (Gushue et al., 2013).

Residential independence has been considered by Bowen as one of the few factors that can help increase differentiation in adults (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). This study found evidence that living independently is

associated with better differentiation, lower cutoff and fusion in youth. Moving out of the parental home to live independently has been reported to encourage autonomy in decision-making, management of adult responsibilities, improved problem-solving abilities, better communication with parents and increased affection for them (Bernier et al., 2005). It also protects youth from identity foreclosure as exposure to peers offers increased opportunities for the exploration of diverse identities based on different values and belief systems (Bosma & Kunnen, 2001). Thus, staying separately may be critical for other developmental transitions in youth, enabling healthy separateness and overall functioning. Evidence has also been found that continued stay with parents or having to return to the parental home after a period of independent living can have deleterious effects on youth (Copp et al., 2017). In the context of the COVID-19 lockdown, where many youngsters were forced to return home and stay for prolonged periods in the parental home, such proximity could impede natural maturational processes and impact the mental health of youth.

A higher level of educational qualification in participants was associated with better differentiation, as professionally qualified participants had lower ER and higher DoS. Higher differentiation facilitates better effortful control, healthy self-regulation strategies and psychosocial maturity, all of which facilitate focusing on one's goals (Gavazzi et al., 1994); Human-Vogel & Rabe, 2014; Skowron & Dendy, 2004). It may be possible that there exists a positive association between educational attainment and differentiation. Existing evidence about such interrelationship is scant, and requires further research.

Being in committed relationships was associated with higher levels of differentiation. It has been established that better differentiation contributes to relationship satisfaction and that low levels of differentiation impede the development of romantic attachment in adults (Peleg, 2008; Skowron, 2000). Further, high anxiety is related to greater emotional reactivity, cut off and fusion (Skowron & Dendy, 2004; Skowron & Schmitt, 2003). According to Bowen's theory, individuals with low anxiety are more likely to be in committed relationships, while those with low differentiation are more likely to use defective distance regulation mechanisms to balance autonomy with togetherness. Current findings further signify the ameliorating effects of differentiation on romantic attachment and highlight the usefulness of differentiation as a framework for understanding and enhancing outcomes in intimate relationships (Freeman & Brown, 2001; Zimmer-Gimbeck et al., 2011). Findings emphasise previously noted conceptual linkages between attachment and systems theories, thus making a case for the possible integration of these theories in order to facilitate a better understanding of familial and intimate relationships in adults (Erdman & Caffery, 2003; Ng & Smith, 2006).

Unlike the study by Skowron and Friedlander (1998), where no relationship was found between parental education and levels of differentiation of youngsters, the current study found that a higher level of parental education had a salubrious effect on the differentiation of their offspring, while the absence of college education in parents related to emotional problems like cutoff and fusion in children. Higher levels of education have been known to influence parenting competence, attitudes, expectations, practices and quality of child care (Davis-Kean, 2005; Huang et al., 2005; Kalil et al., 2012; Morawska et al., 2009). A high level of parental education is also indicative of higher socioeconomic status, which has

been linked to favourable outcomes in children. A low level of education, on the other hand, has been implicated in aversive parenting practices, anger, reactivity and emotional dysregulation in parents (Dubow et al., 2009; Wills et al., 1995). It is possible that higher parental education is itself associated with high parental differentiation. The parental subsystem is influential in providing the right kind of leadership for the family system (Anderson & Sabatelli, 1990; Minuchin & Nichols, 1998). Findings support Bowen's conceptualisation of maturation as a developmental process undertaken by members of the entire family system and not just the individual concerned (Anderson & Sabatelli, 1988, 1990; Bowen, 1978; Carter & McGoldrick, 1980; Kerr & Bowen, 1988; Kramer, 1985).

Conclusion

Indian society is characterised by collectivistic ideals and is culturally tight. Families here are psychologically interdependent. To the knowledge of the authors, this is the first attempt to measure differentiation in Indian youth from Maharashtra and explore the interplay between differentiation and contextual influences. Considering that Bowen's FST provides a powerful systemic conceptualisation of psychological outcomes both at the individual and family levels, the current study is an important step in exploring the cross-cultural validity of the construct in the Indian sociocultural context. Findings confirmed the cross-cultural validity of Bowen's construct within the urban context in India while possibly corroborating problems with the FO scale in this cultural context. Assessing the psychometric equivalence of the tool across the cultural and linguistic divide is a step towards developing tools that are more inclusive and sensitive to the target population.

The results of the study raise the possibility of several intervention points for psychological disorders in youth. Measuring levels of differentiation when assessing for psychological issues can assist in identifying problems within the family system that underlie and maintain issues. Interventions at the systemic level ensure that the beneficial effects of therapy are long-lasting. This is particularly significant considering the demographic dividend that the country anticipates from its young population on the one hand, and the wide prevalence of mental health disorders in them, on the other. Typically, mental health problems are located intrapsychically within the individual. That Indian women are less differentiated, more fused and emotionally reactive, and less assertive than men calls for the urgent need to address systemic and structural factors that generate and sustain mental health problems in women.

Important data regarding systemic factors affecting the mental health of Indian youth was uncovered by this study. High assertiveness needs of young individuals may often misalign with parental expectations, leading to faulty coping mechanisms and increased emotional reactivity. The cultural kaleidoscope in India is varied, comprising people from different religious, linguistic and geographical backgrounds. The western worldview of autonomy and connectedness may be in direct conflict with the worldview of various groups here, and enforcing the same could result in the alienation of the individual from the group (Springer et al., 2009). A therapeutic stance of multicultural sensitivity is crucial while working with youth. As youth is a critical developmental stage where families are actively negotiating more egalitarian roles for maturing members, interventions could include competency development of parents to develop

healthy boundaries, clear rules and roles so that young people may thrive while they remain embedded within the family system. Education and skill enhancement programs for parents do make a difference and are vital, considering that Indian youth stay with their families of origin well into their adulthood, and often even after their marriage (Magill-Evans et al., 2007).

The study has certain limitations. It was an online survey carried out in universities across Maharashtra during the COVID-19 pandemic. Hence, it may be assumed that the respondent pool consisted of students living in urban areas, were English-speaking and had access to a stable internet connection. Thus, the generalizability of findings is limited. It may be useful to measure differentiation from rural areas and undertake comparative studies to understand differentiation across India. Future cross-cultural studies may explore differentiation across nations that are considered to be collectivistic, in order to understand whether differences in findings are related to the value orientations of specific groups of people. The study took place during the pandemic, which is an atypical event. It may be useful to measure the relationship between differentiation and psychological outcomes in "normal" times to ascertain whether the moderate relationship holds. Finally, this was a quantitative study. Qualitative research in the area of differentiation of self in India could help greater insight into the process of differentiation, and help identify factors that facilitate differentiation in Indian families.

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Conflicts of Interest: Both authors have no conflict of interest to report

Availability of data and material: The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author, Mini Narayanan. The data are not publicly available so as to ensure privacy of research participants].

Code Availability: Not Applicable

Ethics Approval: Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai. Ethical clearance certificate can be provided, if required.

Consent to Participate: Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Consent for Publication: The participants have consented to the submission of reports for publication.

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