

# THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

## Bowen's Intergenerational Transmission Process in the Malay Population

**Raba'Aton Adawiah Mohd Yusof**

Senior Lecturer, School of Social and Economic Development,  
University Malaysia Terengganu, Terengganu, Malaysia

**Marilyn Campbell**

Professor, Faculty of Education, School of Cultural & Professional Learning, Queensland  
University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia

### **Abstract:**

*This paper will address Bowen's Intergenerational Transmission process which states that individual and family functions is similar across generations as each family is the product of the many families in the generations that preceded it. Children always see their parents as role models in their lives. How their parents cope with stress, anxiety, make decision and their reactions towards problems will be observed by their children. As observers, children learn and implement what they learn as children to their own family when they are married and have children of their own. This is what Bowen meant by intergenerational transmission process. However, Bowen proposes that the transmission occurs at an emotional level from one generation to the next, emphasizing the fact that the past influences the present. The study of Bowen Family System Theory (BFST) has been done in the west but has not been investigated yet in Malaysia. This paper will describe a study that tests the Bowen's theory on the Malay population in Malaysia. Three hundred and fifty Malay families were approached to complete a Differentiation of Self (DSI) to measure the possibility of intergenerational process between parents and their children. The finding shows that intergenerational effect was found in the Malay population. The implications of the finding in the society are discussed.*

**Keywords:** Family counselling, Malaysia, Bowen family system theory

### **1. Introduction**

The definition of family varies according to culture and religious influences. Culture affects how people value themselves and others, how they appreciate their family, their life and their beliefs (Laungani, 2004). Religion affects the way individuals perceive the family. Malaysia is a collectivist society which emphasizes family and group affiliation rather than the worth of the individual (Jamal, 2007). The household structure in Malaysian communities is predominantly nuclear, although household composition is quite fluid and often complex and members move in and out depending on need. Typically in this community, if the adult children do not stay with their parents, they often live nearby (Ng, 2003). Extended family, including kin and neighbours who are treated 'like family' are also considered as part of the basic structure in a Malay traditional family (Harun & Hamzah, 2007).

The structure of kinship and family systems is extremely strong in traditional Malay families. Relatives will help to look after the children like their own children and the children will always behave even though their parents are absent. This system seem to control social problems and strengthened the community and society in general in the past. However, this traditional has been challenged by technology and modernization. Existing social relationships within the community and the family have been weakened by the new ideology which promotes individual freedom especially among teenagers (Timimi, 2005). Influenced by the principles of autonomy and separation from the family, present day young people in Malay society want more freedom from their parents and from the strictures of community practice. Thus, there is a crisis in Malay society with the young people relinquishing the traditional values that previously bound families and communities together in Malaysia (Bajunid, 2004).

Bowen's Family System Theory views the family as the product of the many families in the generations that preceded it. The theory conceptualizes the family as an emotional unit where a child learns and grows in an emotional environment. This unit links individuals in the family together as a system but it may be unstable unless each member of the family is well differentiated (Bowen, 1978; Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Differentiation of self is the key concept of Bowen's theory which refers to the ability to be yourself while still connecting with others in the family. It is learnt in the family of origin and passed down through the intergenerational transmission process (Bowen, 1976).

According to Kerr and Bowen (1988), individual and family functions are similar across generations. Anxiety, stress and immaturity may be transferred emotionally from parents to their children and to the generation after that through the "family projection process" until they develop an awareness to overcome it. The emotional processes transmitted from one generation to the next generation which

describe the past influence the present (Nichols & Schwartz, 2006). Differentiation of self will help to balance between emotional and thinking processes. Individuals with highly differentiated levels are able to separate their feelings and emotions and are less reactive to praise and criticism.

However, there is limited study about the differentiation of self transmission process in eastern culture especially in Malaysia. This paper will examine Bowen's intergenerational transmission process particularly in the Malay population.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

Nine hundred families were approached but only three hundred and seventy four families consented giving a response rate of 38.9%. The families lived along the coastal zone in the districts of Besut, Kuala Terengganu and Kemaman in Terengganu, one of the state in Malaysia. Participants were 374 parents ( $n = 246$  fathers, 128 mothers;  $M = 48.84$ ,  $SD = 7.49$ ; age range = 31-71 years) and 374 children ( $n = 150$  males, 224 females;  $M = 17.69$ ,  $SD = 3.81$ ; age range = 8-36 years).

### 2.2. Measures

#### Differentiation of Self Inventory (DSI)

DSI is a self-report inventory (Skowron & Friedlander, 1998) which assesses differentiation of self amongst adults. This inventory is based on the Bowen Family Theory. The self-report has 43-items and consists of four subscales. Emotional reactivity (ER), "I" position (IP), Emotional cut-off (EC) and Fusion with other (FO). The 11 items in the ER subscale assess how a person responds to environmental stimuli with emotional flooding, emotional lability or hypersensitivity. The IP subscale contains 11 items that measure degrees of responsibility in taking an "I" position, ability to think and defined sense of self when pressured to do otherwise. The 12 items in EC reflect the feelings in the relationship, discomfort with intimacy, feeling excessively vulnerable, defensive over functioning and distance in close relationships. Finally the 9 items of the FO subscale reflect emotional overinvolvement with others including triangulation and overidentification with parents and significant others. ER and IP are the intrapsychic components and EC and FO are the interpersonal components.

Internal consistency reliability estimates in an adult sample of the DSI and its subscales are calculated using Cronbach's Alpha ranged from .74 to .88 with the overall scale being .88 (Skowron & Friedlander, 1998). This measurement has been translated to the Malay language and has been proved reliable and valid to be used in this study. For this study, pilot test has been done to verify the reliability of translated DSI to be used with Malay families it had a Cronbach's alphas of .85.

### 2.3. Demographic Questionnaire

The demographic questionnaire requested participants to indicate gender, age, marital status, parental status, and educational level, number of children, occupation, income and year of marriage.

### 2.4. Procedure

Participants were identified through their head villagers (ketua kampung), from previous meetings before the data collection process. A packet containing two envelopes of questionnaires, a demographic sheet and a cover letter were distributed to each family; one envelope for parents and the other for their children. Completed questionnaires were returned in the sealed envelopes to the head villager's office.

Participants were asked to respond individually without any discussion with family members. Each family was identified through a unique code number on each questionnaire sheet to ensure that participants will remain anonymous.

## 3. Results

There were no significant differences in level of differentiation of self between parents and children which is parents  $M = 3.54$ ,  $SD = 0.58$  and children  $M = 3.55$ ,  $SD = 0.59$ ,  $t(748) = 0.27$ ,  $p = .79$  (two tailed). The results of a Pearson correlation coefficient test show that there was a strong correlation between the level of differentiation of self of parents and the level of differentiation of children ( $r = .62$ ,  $n = 748$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ).

## 4. Discussion

As there was no differences on the Differentiation of Self Inventory (DSI) between parents and children it clearly showed that level of differentiation of self between parents and their children are quiet similar. The strong correlation between the level of differentiation of self of parents and that of their children indicate that the intergenerational process had indeed occurred in the Malay sample, meaning that the level of differentiation of self seems to be intergenerational from parents to their children. According to Bowen (1978), well differentiated parents will produce a well differentiated child. If parents are well differentiated, avoiding any emotional dependency, allowing their children to makes mistakes and encourage them to take responsibility, their children will develop their own level of differentiation of self as similar pattern as their parents.

Conversely, if children grow up in an undifferentiated family, they will inherit the same pattern of low level of differentiation as their parents. How well children react to any life changes will depend on how well differentiated they are from their family.

Family of origin is the most important social group that influences children's development. As stress by Bowen (1978), intergenerational transmission tends to happen in the family who still maintains traditions from the past generations. Exposure to

family patterns and processes within the family of origin occurs through the family projection process and children will emerge with a similar level of differentiation of self as their parents. However, the projection process occurs at an emotional level and normally will vary for each sibling depending on a parent's experience in their own families of origin.

Malays are regarded as a collectivist culture from eastern Asia, who value harmonious interpersonal relationships highly and put more stress on group membership than the individual (Bochner, 1994). Within the family, the Malay child grows up emotionally secure but also dependent. This is because the child learns through precept and imitation within the family. Especially during early childhood children are socialized by observing what happens in their family. This process starts in the family of origin as parents, older siblings and other senior relations act as role models.

Children in Malay families are also expected to be obedient at all times and to respect their parents very much after God (Bajunid, 2004). Children are expected to be able to assume responsibility, develop understanding and give support to younger siblings including cousins and other younger kin. This activity normally is passed down from generation to generation and involves the entire family members. Any problems which occur will be treated and resolved by the whole family.

Therefore, the significant finding on intergenerational process may be explained through this socialisation process in Malay families. This preliminary finding shows the importance of stress management and problem solving in the family. Because the child learns through precept and imitation within the family, the education of parents concerning the effect and impact of their behaviour and action to their children should be strengthened. Awareness about the importance of the level of differentiation of self in the children can be applied in the development of effective counseling strategies with Malay families.

## 5. References

1. Bowen, M. (1976). Theory in the practice of psychotherapy. In P. J. Guerin (Ed.), *Family therapy : Theory and practice* (pp. 42-90). New York: Gardner Press.
2. Bowen, M. (1978). *Family therapy in clinical practice*. New York: Jason Aronson.
3. Bajunid, O. F. (2004). Islam in Malaysia: Between rhetoric and reality. *NIAS-Nordic Institute of Asian Studies*, 4,6-7.
4. Bochner, S. (1994). Cross-cultural differences in the self-concept: A test of Hofstede's individualism/collectivism distinction. *Journal of Cross-cultural Psychology*, 25, 273-283.
5. Harun, L. M., & Hamzah, R. (2007). *Asas Kaunseling Keluarga*. Shah Alam: Pusat Penerbitan Universiti (UPENA).
6. Jamal, M. (2007). Type-A behavior in a multinational organization: a study of two countries. *Stress and Health*, 23, 101-109.
7. Kerr, M. E., & Bowen, M. (1988). *Family evaluation: An approach based on Bowen theory*. New York: Norton.
8. Kling, Z. (1995). The Malay family: Beliefs and realities. *Journal of Comparative Family Study*, 26, 43-48.
9. Laungani, P. (2004). *Asian perspectives in counselling and psychotherapy*: New York : Brunner-Routledge.
10. Ng, K. S. (2003). Family therapy in Malaysia: an update. *Contemporary family therapy.*, 20, 37-45.
11. Nichols, M. P., & Schwartz, R. C. (2006). *Family therapy: Concepts and methods* (7 ed.). Boston: Pearson Education.
12. Skowron, E. A., & Friedlander, M. L. (1998). The Differentiation of Self inventory: Development and initial validation. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 45, 235-246.
13. Timimi, S. (2005). effect of globalisation on children's mental health. *British Medical journal*, 331, 37-39.