

Differentiation of Self among Students at Higher Secondary School Level in Relation to Their Decision -Making Capacity

“The ability to be in emotional contact with others yet still autonomous in one’s own thinking and emotional functioning is the essence of differentiation of self”
(Kerr & Bowen, 1988)

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Abstract- *The modern context requires people at all levels to take appropriate decisions in life situations. This can only occur in a person who is differentiated at the level of the self in a balanced manner. This process starts in the family at an early stage. This study evaluates the level of differentiation of self among 300 higher secondary school students (169 males, 131 females) in Kerala and their ability to make decisions. It also tries to find the correlation between differentiation of self and decision making. The findings indicate the need for greater level of differentiation of self and development of decision-making skills among students. This study also found that there is good correlation between differentiation of self and decision making.*

Keywords- *Differentiation of self, decision making, gender higher secondary, Kerala*

I. INTRODUCTION

A child is a ‘person’ growing to be productive and happy through the involvement of various agencies like school, family, peer groups, society, religious bodies and government policies, acting at different levels imprinting their influence on the ‘person.’ The family, a critical and important factor in the development of a person collectively influences the individual and in turn is influenced by the individual resulting in each person developing uniquely enabling them to develop unique personalities with a strong sense of self. Such persons with a strong sense of self understand their relationship with the family but are also confident to take a stand when necessary (Bowlby, 1988). They have very good differentiation of self and do not generally give up on their thoughts under the influence of a group and remain calm and level headed in the face of conflicts or

criticisms. Those without this sense of self are generally crowd pleasers that are self-conscious with low confidence levels.

Differentiation of self involves the process of freeing oneself from family's processes to define the identity of self, resulting in differing opinions and values than the family, yet being emotionally connected to them. A differentiated person reflects calmly on conflicted interactions, understands one's role in the conflict and chooses a different response in the future (Bowen,1978), translating from a way of thinking to a way of being. Though families and other social groups affect how a person thinks, individuals vary in their susceptibility to 'group think,' as also groups vary in the amount of pressure they exert for conformity. This difference reflects the level of differentiation of self. Persons with less developed differentiation of self are impacted more by others. The building blocks of self are inborn but an individual's family relationships during childhood and adolescence primarily determine how much "self" he develops (Skowron&Friedlander,1998). This level of self is generally unchangeable unless a person makes a structured and long-term effort to change it.

Persons with well-differentiated 'self' recognize realistic dependence on others but stay calm and clear headed in conflicts, criticism or rejection and carefully assess facts to distinguish emotionality. Decision making about familial and social issues are guided by reflective thinking rather than 'feelings of the moment.' Saying and doing are matched and acting is selfless in the best interest of the group on thoughtful choice not as a response to group pressure. Thinking confidently such a person supports proper thinking without becoming a disciple or through polarization of differences.

They have a clear sense of boundaries-they know where they leave off and another begins, are freer of fear- fear of rejection or need to control. They maintain a sense of confidence and safety across a variety of settings and situations, are at peace with themselves hence do not try to constantly prove themselves, do not confuse "being needed" with "being loved" (caretaker personalities), nor confuse "being taken care of" as "being loved" (dependent personalities). Such persons radiate "inside – out", not "outside – in." A highly differentiated person is responsible, chooses more often, and negotiates more easily (Jenkins et al;2005).

Differentiation of self is taken from Bowen's family system therapy which focused on patterns the family developed to defuse anxiety occurring because of the perception of either too much closeness or too great a distance in a relationship. This therapy is applicable universally and views family as an emotional unit where systems theory describes its complex interactions. The family members are intensely connected emotionally and affect each other's thoughts, feelings and actions, solicit each other's attention, approval and support and react to each other's needs, expectations and distress.

The next level of this study deals with decision making. Decision making is always related to the situation or the environment. It implies freedom to choose from different alternatives of action without coercion and uncertainty about the final outcome, and is firmly related to an individual's life style. It results from interpretations based on the individual's experiences and cognitive skills. In ambiguous situations it requires different cognitive processes including analysis of advantages and disadvantages, probabilities, mental flexibility for planning and association of novel information with the current situation (Tokar et al;2003). Risky situations require high differentiation of self which in turn is characterized by higher levels of decision- making capacity. A well-differentiated person balances the diversities of a situation irrespective of its riskiness or

ambiguity. They do not lose control and make decisions based upon logic and wisdom in all emotional situations. Undifferentiated persons have difficulty in decision making due to poor individual identity and have problems in their interpersonal relationships due to low independence. The purpose of differentiation is to bring equilibrium between cognition and emotions. It varies from individual to individual. The individual differences owned by the person have influences on differentiation of self and decision making (Adair,2000). We are always making decisions in life which have consequences. Factors affecting decisions are : past experience (both past success and failure serve as learning experiences), cognitive biases- gained from observations and conclusions which if false can lead to faulty conclusions and reasoning, individual differences- like age, socio-economic status, education and cognitive abilities, and finally personal relevance- what one believes in is strongly adhered to.

Decisions are always taken within a decision environment which presents all the possible information, alternatives, values and preferences during the process. There are a number of factors that have essential impact on this. These are personal beliefs, personal values and personality traits of the individual that authenticate the choices people make. Understanding of these kinds of factors, which influence decision making process, is important to understanding what decisions are made (Acevedo, & Krueger, 2004).

All of these multiple factors are important in determining the influence of the differentiation of self in the decision making especially so the capacity among students of higher secondary school.

II. NEED AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Differentiation of self is a complex amalgamation of emotional maturity, ability to think rationally in the midst of an emotional situation and the ability to maintain close emotional relationship. Murray Bowen (1976) describes four factors that are indicators of a person's level of differentiation of self. They are emotional reactivity (taps a person's tendency to react to stress by irrational emotional flooding), the ability to take an I-position (describes one's ability to stand up for oneself and independently express one's will), emotional cut off (taps one's tendency to isolate oneself and cut off relations as a way of dealing with tension and symbiotic relationship) and fusion with others. Secure attachment with the parental figure is associated with healthy psychosocial development of the individual **Bowlby (1988)** as a child with a secure attachment feels safe to explore its surroundings since it knows that the parent is available and receptive when needed. This attachment style is also connected with the individual's ability to make connections with other people and cope with stressful situations (**Ketterson & Blustein, 1997**).

A well differentiated person will function in a self-directed and autonomous way without being controlled by their family or other significant individuals, at the same time they will not be emotionally cut off from these important relationships. They create their own individual sense of self while remaining in contact with other individuals. **Johnson and Waldo (1998)**, write of undifferentiated persons as "people who are fused do not have a clear sense of self and operate from an emotionally reactive style, particularly under stress" (p. 406). They are emotionally tied to others and their thought processes are often overwhelmed by emotions (**Kerr & Bowen, 1988**).

Parents are the first teachers of children to whom they impart goodness and act as a motivating force for them.

The home is where the child gets emotional, physical, social needs satisfied. The family relationships affect the child's emotional adjustments and decision making ability. Good decision making depends on understanding the situation well, being aware of our choices and seeing the consequences of our choices. Decision making skills are important in children of all ages, particularly adolescents which is an important developmental task as well as experiencing the related positive and negative consequences.

Related studies on differentiation of self and decision making : **Skowron (2000), Peleg (2002), Skowron (2004), Schwartzetal (2006), Murray (2007), Mohsenion (2008), Gabelma (2012), Dagan (2016), Neto (2018)**. The variables correlated in these studies are anxiety, adjustment, parenting styles, stress ,emotional intelligence, locus of control, resilience, self-concept, personal satisfaction ,well-being and self-esteem. None of the studies reviewed deal with the relationship between differentiation of self and decision making capacity among higher secondary school students and hence the need and significance of the present study.

III. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To assess the level of differentiation of self among higher secondary school students.
2. To assess the level of decision-making capacity among higher secondary school students.
3. To find out the significant difference in differentiation of self among higher secondary school students based on gender
4. To find out the significant difference in decision making capacity among higher secondary school students based on gender
5. To find out the relationship between differentiation of self and decision making capacity among higher secondary school students in the whole sample and subsample based on gender

IV. HYPOTHESES OF THE STUDY

1. The level of differentiation of self among higher secondary school students varies
2. The level of decision-making capacity among higher secondary school students varies
3. There exists no significant difference in differentiation of self among higher secondary school students based on gender
4. There exists no significant difference in decision making capacity among higher secondary school students based on gender
5. There exists no significant relationship between differentiation of self and decision-making capacity among higher secondary school students in the whole sample and subsample based on gender

V. METHODOLOGY IN BRIEF

A. Method

The present study was intended to find out the relationship between differentiation of self and decision-making capacity among students of higher secondary schools. Hence normative survey method was found to be the most appropriate in the present investigation, considering the objectives of the study and the nature of data. The variables selected for the study are Differentiation of Self and Decision-Making Capacity.

B. Research Participants

The study was conducted on a representative sample of 300 students of six higher secondary schools. The sample was selected by stratified sampling technique giving due representation to gender only.

C. Research Instruments

i) Demographic questionnaire. A brief form used to assess basic demographic information about the participants' gender, locale, subject stream, type of institution etc.

ii) Differentiation of Self Inventory. The Differentiation of Self Inventory (DSI) was developed and standardised by investigators. The differentiation of the self-scale is made to find out whether the adolescent students are able to maintain differentiation in their life. It mainly stresses that whether they can create a balance between intimacy and autonomy in their relations. Negative and positive statements are included in this scale. There are 40 questions included in this scale.

It is a 40-item self-report questionnaire. It uses a 5-point Likert scale (with items such as "I'm concerned about losing my independence in intimate relationships." This inventory is used to measure an individual's level of differentiation of self, which is defined as "the degree to which one is able to balance (a) emotional and intellectual functioning and (b) intimacy and autonomy in relationships".

The DSI is comprised of four subscales: (a) emotional reactivity, (b) emotional cut-off, (c) fusion with others, and (d) the ability to take an I-position.

Emotional reactivity- refers to the individual's ability to remain calm and process their emotions intellectually in the face of anxiety. Poorly differentiated individuals tend to lose themselves in their emotions and have difficulties separating themselves from the emotions of others.

Emotional cut-off- refers to the individual's ability to deal with intense interpersonal relationships. Poorly differentiated individuals tend to distance themselves from significant others when they are faced with intimate relationships. They tend to isolate themselves, deny the importance of their family, and present themselves as extremely independent.

Fusion with others- refers to the tendency for poorly differentiated individuals to become overly involved with others. They tend to be rigid in their thoughts and attitudes; above all else, they pursue acceptance and approval from others

The ability to take an ‘I-position’ - refers to an individual’s ability to think and act for themselves in the face of differing viewpoints. Poorly differentiated individuals tend to succumb to the pressure of others, conform to the thoughts and actions of others, and have difficulties taking and defending a position

This research used all four subscales to calculate the full-scale score for differentiation of self of an individual. The validity and reliability co-efficient of the tool was 0.64 and 0.61 indicating that the tool is valid and reliable for the purpose it meant for.

iii) Decision Making Capacity Scale

The scale was developed and standardised by the investigators to assess the decision making capacity of higher secondary school students. Decision making scale was prepared to find out the decision making capacity of higher secondary school students. Identifying the alternatives and making the right and judicial choice is very complex for the adolescent so in order to identify their decision making capacity positive and negative 40 questions were included.

The instrument developed is a five point scale consisting of forty items corresponding to five dimensions viz. Motivating and Influencing factors, Thinking and Analysing, Adapting and Changing, Bias and Preference, Opinions and Support. The content and construct validity of the scale was estimated. The reliability co-efficient of the scale was estimated by test -retest method .The scale obtained a validity co-efficient of 0.62 and reliability of 0.68 showing that the scale is reasonably valid and has high reliability.

C. Statistical Techniques Used for the Study

The statistical techniques used are descriptive statistics viz. mean and standard deviation and inferential statistics viz. ‘t’ test, co-efficient of correlation

D. Analysis and Interpretation

Table: 1 Level of differentiation of self of higher secondary school students

Levels	High	Average	Low
Norms	$M + \sigma$	$M + \sigma$ to $M - \sigma$	$M - \sigma$
		σ	

Scores	168.32	168.32 to 139.82	139.82
No. of students	48	214	38
Percentage	16 %	71.33 %	12.66 %

Table-1 shows the level of differentiation of self of higher secondary school students. It is clear that 16% of students have high differentiation of self, 71.33% of students have average differentiation of self and 12.66% of students have low differentiation of self. This would indicate that about 84% of the students have low or average differentiation of self, which is a very high level of variation. Hence it can be concluded that the higher secondary school students vary in their level of differentiation of self. Hence the tenability of hypothesis formulated in this context. 'The level of differentiation of self among higher secondary school students varies' is accepted'

Families in the Kerala context are highly parent centered with high levels of fusion and dependence. This prevents the differentiation of self. The basic building blocks of a 'self' are inborn, but an individual's family relationships during childhood and adolescence primarily determine how much "self" he develops. This may be the reason that the higher secondary school students varies in their level of differentiation of self.

Table: 2 Level of decision making of higher secondary school students

Levels	High	Average	Low
Norms	$M + \sigma$	$M + \sigma$ to $M - \sigma$	$M - \sigma$
Scores	169.91	169.91 to 140.45	140.45
No. of students	46	218	36
Percentage	15.33%	72.66%	12%

Table -2 shows the level of decision-making capacity of higher secondary school students revealing that 15.33% of students have high decision making capacity, 72.66% of students have average decision making capacity and 12% of students have low decision making capacity. This would indicate that about 84% of the students have low or average level of decision making, which is a very high level of variation. It can be concluded that higher secondary students, varies in their level of decision-making capacity. Hence the tenability of hypothesis formulated in this context ‘the level of decision-making capacity among higher secondary school students varies’ is accepted.

There are many factors affecting adolescent decision making and they include cognitive, psychological, social, cultural and societal factors. The findings tie in well with the findings of the study where there is variation in the differentiation of self. Variation in differentiation of self would also reflect in the decision-making skills of the persons. This may be the reason for the differences among higher secondary school students in their decision making capacity.

- **Significance of Difference in Differentiation of Self-based on Gender**

Table: 3 Data showing the significant difference in Differentiation of self of the higher secondary school students based on gender.

Gender	Sample Size	Mean	Standard Deviation	Calculated 't' value	Table Value		Level of significance
					.01	.05	
Male	61	51.04	13.31	4.03	2.58	1.96	Highly Significant
Female	61	57.57	14.56				

Table -3 shows that the calculated 't' value is greater than the table value, 1.96 at 0.05 level of significance. Therefore the null hypothesis formulated is rejected and the findings are said to be statistically highly significant. Hence it can be inferred that male and female higher secondary school students differ significantly in their differentiation of self. The mean values indicate that female students are having higher

differentiation of self (157.57) than male students (151.04). Hence the tenability of hypothesis formulated ‘There exists no significant difference in differentiation of self among higher secondary school students based on gender is rejected’

The results of the current study demonstrated that, at least for the present sample, adolescent females experienced greater differentiation of self than did males. This result could also be due to the fewer number of participants in the female group (139 females vs. 161males). Moreover, in the Kerala context the awareness of gender rights and reaction against gender discrimination is greater. This may be the reason that females differ in their differentiation of self than their male counterparts.

- **Significance of Difference in Decision Making Capacity-based on gender**

Table:4 Data showing the significance difference between decision making capacity of higher secondary school students based on gender

Gender	Sample	Mean	Standard Deviation	Calculated 't' value	Table Value		Level of significance
					0.01	0.05	
Male	161	151.4	15.19	5.07	.58	.96	Significant at 0.05 level
Female	139	159.54	12.91				

Table -4 shows that the calculated ‘t’ value is greater than the table value, 1.96 at 0.05 level of significance. Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected and the findings are said to be statistically significant. Hence alternative hypothesis accepted which indicates that there is a significant difference in decision making of higher secondary school students with respect to gender. The mean values indicate that female students are having more decision making capacity (159.54) than male students(151.4).Hence the tenability of hypothesis

formulated ‘There exists no significant difference in decision making capacity among higher secondary school students based on gender is rejected

Decision making is a sign given by the individual that he/she understands themselves and the social structures and internalizes them because decision making requires high awareness in an informational and emotional sense (**Kuzgun, 1992**). This finding ties up well with the fact that females have a higher level of differentiation of self than males, indicating their greater ability to take decision. This may be the reason that the female students differ in their decision-making capacity than their male counterparts.

- **Relationship Between Differentiation of Self and Decision Making Capacity**

Table: 5 Data showing relationship between differentiation of self and Decision Making Capacity of higher secondary school students; Whole sample

Variables	Samples	Calculated r value	Verbal interpretation
Differentiation of self and decision making capacity	300	0.661	Substantial / Marked correlation

Table-5 explains the details of relationship between differentiation of self and decision making capacity of higher secondary school students. It is observed that the calculated ‘r’ value is 0.661, which means a high level of correlation and the findings are said to be statistically significant. This means that there exists a positive relationship between Differentiation of self and Decision making capacity of higher secondary school students. The findings show that students with high differentiation of self are having high decision making capacity. When the differentiation of self increases there will be an increase in decision making capacity and vice versa. So the null hypothesis formulated ‘There exists no significant relationship between differentiation of self and decision making capacity among higher secondary school students in the whole sample is rejected

Pellerone and colleagues (2015) explored relationship between differentiation of self and decision-making, and they found that the high differentiation of self favoured Decision-Making style. In the current study the results were generally in line with findings of **Kimmes & Heckman, 2017; Scott and Bruce, 2005; Pellerone, Passanisi, & Bellomo 2015**. Rational and healthier decision-making was associated with healthy aspects of differentiation of self, while Dependent and Avoidant, the less healthy decision making, and was associated with less healthy differentiation of self. The findings of this study are in line with the generally understood facts regarding the differentiation of self and decision making.

- **Relationship between differentiation of self and decision making capacity among the male higher secondary school students.**

Table: 6 Data showing the relationship between differentiation of self and decision making capacity among the males of higher secondary school students.

Variable	Name of group	Samples	Calculated 'r' value	Variable interpretation
Differentiation of self and Decision making capacity	Male	161	0.615	Substantial/Marked correlation

Table 6 explains the details of coefficient of correlation (r) between differentiation of self and decision making capacity of the males. It is observed that the calculated 'r' value is 0.615 which indicates substantial/marked correlation between differentiation of self and decision making capacity between the variables. The r value shows that there is significant positive correlation between differentiation of self and decision making capacity of males. Hence null hypothesis 'there exists no significant relationship between differentiation of self and decision making capacity among male higher secondary school students' is rejected. This validates the basis of the hypothesis of this study regarding differentiation of self and decision making being in parallel.

- **Relationship between differentiation of self and decision making capacity among female higher secondary school students.**

Table 7: Data showing the relationship between differentiation of self and decision making capacity among the female higher secondary school students.

Variable	Name of group	Samples	Calculated 'r' value	Variable interpretation
Differentiation of self and Decision making capacity	Female	139	0.680	Substantial/Marked correlation

Table- 7 explains the details of coefficient of correlation (r) between differentiation of self and decision- making capacity of females. It is observed that the calculated ' r' value was found to be 0.680 which indicates the substantial/marked correlation between the variables. The r value shows that there is a significant positive correlation between differentiation of self and decision- making capacity of females. Hence null hypothesis ' There exists no significant relationship between differentiation of self and decision making capacity among female higher secondary school students' is rejected. This validates the basis of the hypothesis of this study regarding differentiation of self and decision making being in parallel. .

VI. IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

The Differentiation of Self inventory that was used in this study is made to find out whether adolescent students are able to maintain differentiation in their life. It mainly stresses that whether they can create a balance between intimacy and autonomy. Dealing with issues like emotional reactivity (the ability to remain calm and process emotions intellectually, emotional cut-off which is the ability to deal with intense interpersonal relationships or fusion with others which is the tendency to be overly involved with others and finally the ability to take an I-position which is the ability to think and act for themselves. The study indicated that 84 % of students in this study had poor or average differentiation of self. Only 16% had high differentiation of self.

The finding is not surprising as the socio-demographic features would indicate. Most families in the study come from very conservative family situations where patriarchy is dominant and children do not have much say in the structure. They are dependent for everything from finances to emotional support. Nearly everything in their life is dictated by the norms laid down by the society, community etc. to which they belong. Such being the case development of autonomy is not easy and members of the family are intensely connected with each other. The family becomes an emotional system as stated by Bowen (1978). When there is anxiety in the family system for whatever reason it affects the whole family. As anxiety goes up, the emotional connectedness of family members become more stressful than comforting. These lead to poor differentiation of self, form matrices that affect the children and finally their development.

While it is not possible to change the structural elements in society as the family is entrenched in the mode for a long time, it is possible to educate the units involved to deal with the situation. Family members can be taught to learn and work together, to better understand how an individual's action can affect the emotions of others. Emotions can be infectious. Members can learn to deal with emotions.

Such learning among family members can improve the differentiation of self and enable students to become more autonomous so that they are better equipped to deal with life in the long run.

This study also shows the correlation between decision making and differentiation of self in addition to the level of decision making among students. Here again there is variation in the decision making among the students. It is not surprising that as with average or low differentiation of self, there was average or low decision making (84%) among students. Identifying the alternatives and making the right and judicial choice is very complex for the adolescent. Forty items corresponding to five dimensions viz. Motivating and Influencing factors, Thinking and Analysing, Adapting and Changing, Bias and Preference, Opinions and Support were covered and the scores show the deficit in skill with the students. Decision making is the process of defining alternatives, taking into consideration the presence of various events and happenings, as well as aiming at choosing and realizing the best alternative in relation to life styles and personal values . This does not occur in a vacuum, it needs an enriching environment and for this a rich family environment is essential.

The outcome of this study also shows that decision making and differentiation are linked and one cannot occur without the other. The process is inter-related and has to begin in the family.

- It is extremely important for the next generation to develop differentiation of self in order for balanced development. This has to happen in the developmental process in the family environment.
- Decision making skills are strongly associated with differentiation of self and for proper decision making to occur there has to be high level of differentiation of self.
- Familial and Social structures need to evolve with the changing times to incorporate the changes that are requisite to bring about these changes.
- Fused family structures and conservative cultures need to study the need of the times to understand better the movements in society.
- Familial structures cannot be changed but psycho-education can be provided to deal with the needs of the children to grow with differentiation of self.

VII.CONCLUSION

The development of the individual as a healthy person who is useful to society, family and self is preliminary imparted in the family environment but also accessed and concretized in the school. Considering the importance of the all-round development of the individual, methods need to be evolved to evaluate the student's level of development of individuality and personhood. It is also a matter of concern whether

interventions need to be advised with the involvement of family so that therapeutic practices can be implemented to enable students to get a firm footing in the journey of life. Differentiation of self is a never ending process. Taking action to increase one's self-differentiation is a major step in the journey of personal transformation. If the goal is to live a life one must learn to distinguish thinking from feeling even in – or perhaps, especially in – the midst of anxiety and negative emotions.

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