
Assessment of Self Cohesion (ASC)

Brenda J. Barnwell, Mark Stone

Aurora University, Aurora, Illinois

ABSTRACT

Mental health professionals recognize the need to integrate theoretical frameworks when working with clients although assessment of clients tends to focus on one theoretical treatment. The Assessment of Self Cohesion (ASC) measures an integration of two theoretical frameworks; Kohut's theory of Self Psychology and Bowen's Family Systems Theory. For individuals and families facing anxiety, transitions, as well as conflict, the ASC permits clinicians to examine the level of self cohesion of each person as a point of reference for intervention.

INTRODUCTION

An interesting pattern appeared when utilizing the EBSCO search engine to explore the Bowen's Family Systems Theory and Kohut's Self Psychology. Family Systems Theory produced 61,289 citations and Self Psychology yielded 12,237 with Kohut's Self Psychology generating 487 articles and Bowen's Family Systems Theory 285 articles. Kohut's Self Psychology combined with Bowen's Family Systems Theory yielded no articles.

Clinicians and clients may benefit from an understanding of the level of self cohesion that can be assessed. The specific needs of an individual and members of a family may be better addressed when the levels of cohesion and needs are examined. A treatment plan and interventions may be more effective when driven by this integrated assessment. Individualized assessments typically do not assess familial factors, and a family focus rarely assesses the individual needs.

BOWEN FAMILY SYSTEMS THEORY

Bowen (in Nichols 2008, p. 126) affirms, "All families vary along a continuum from emotional fusion to differentiation." His approach addresses unresolved emotional reactivity to primary caretakers. Unresolved issues create vulnerability that increases the risk and likelihood of repeating conflictual patterns in other relationships. Bowen's approach specifies that, "Human relationships are driven by two counter balancing life forces: individuality and togetherness. Each of us needs companionship and a degree of independence" (Bowen/Nichols, p. 125). Bowen defined "differentiation of self" as the "ability to be flexible and act wisely, even in the face of anxiety" (p. 127). A healthy personality cannot develop without differentiation. The higher the level of differentiation, the higher the level of resiliency. Undifferentiated family system generate conflict and pathology resulting in multigenerational emotional reactivity to anxiety. When parents do not find effective ways to deal with their emotions, especially anxiety, they transmit these anxious traits on to their children. The consequence is familial anxiety passed from generation to generation.

Change in the family system occurs when anxiety reactivity is diminished because family members then learn to understand how they are involved in destructive patterns of behavior. Bowenian therapists teach differentiation, avoidance of triangulation, and the re-opening of "cut off" family relationships (p. 146). Resolving an "emotional cutoff" promotes the health and well-being in the family system by allowing persons to move beyond blame and anger. Relationship experiments allow family members to become aware of system processes while recognizing their own roles. Bowen's goal was not to change people or solve problems, but for members of families to learn more about themselves as well as their relationship with others by assuming responsibility for their own issues. Family Systems Theory specifies eight constructs: (1) differentiation of self, (2) emotional triangles, (3) nuclear family

**Address for correspondence:*

mstone@aurora.edu

emotional process, (4) family projection process, (5) emotional cutoffs, (6) the process of multigenerational transmission, (7) sibling position, and (8) societal emotional process. These eight constructs explain the interconnection of individuals within the family. Accuracy in assessment is increased when the individual is observed in the family system by systemic affiliations and interactions. Self Psychology According to Elson (1986, p. 9), “Self Psychology arose out of necessity.” Kohut concluded that clients sought to merge with an idealized object figure to meet their needs. His primary focus is upon the self. Disturbances of the self seek psychic organization. Two concepts summarize his theory -- “exchanges” and “empathy” (Kohut, 1971). Clinicians must understand which emotional factors promote or hinder self-object development in the client. When the clinician demonstrates empathy, cohesion within the client’s self may improve. Self cohesion occurs through internalizations of clinician self object functions into client self functions (Kohut, 1971).

The self can be viewed as the core of one’s personality (Kohut, 1971). Goldstein (2001) opined, “Self Psychology sees all psychopathology as reflecting self deficits - that is gaps, or missing, or underdeveloped elements in self structure that come about as a result of unattuned or traumatic caretaking” (p. 109). Symptoms may be a consequence of unmet need arising from deprivation and excessive parental involvement producing under-stimulated, fragmented, over stimulated, or overburdened states. Kohut’s approach examines how clients engage with caregivers through exploring the relationship between the client and the clinician (Hollis & Woods, 1981). The self responds to other objects and the environment based upon past, present and anticipated future events. Creation of the self occurs from subjectively arranging "framed events." Objects and environments influence how the self reacts to stimuli whether past, present, or future (Kohut, 1971). “The narcissistic line of development is active from the beginning of life and is a precondition for adequate personality functioning” (Banai, Mikulincer, & Shaver, 2005, p. 225). The ASC elicits responses to items constructed from the essential concepts of Self Psychology and Family Systems Theory. The items elicit a client’s perception of the following eleven (11) concepts: *empathy, mirroring, twinship, idealization, self-cohesion, circular causality, triangulation, emotional suppression, patterns, structure, and differentiation of self.* ASC materials include a hand scored test form, scoring sheet, and manual. The test form contains space for demographic information and instructions for completing the ASC. The test form contains 30 items using a zero to five (0-5) Likert scale for recording item responses to indicate the statement that best describes the respondent at the time of administration: 0 = *Unlike me*, 1 = *Barely like me*, 2 = *A bit like me*, 3 = *Somewhat like me*, 4 = *Mostly like me*, 5 = *Very much like me*. The ASC takes eight to ten minutes to complete. Administration requires only the test form, pen or pencil, and a flat writing surface. The testing environment should be quiet, distraction free, and adequately illuminated. The ASC is usually administered individually, but care should be given to assure the directions are understood, and assure the examinee understands all the items. The reading level of the ASC is Grade 7.3 according to the Flesch formula. If the instrument is administered to several people at one time, the environment should be arranged to protect the privacy and confidentiality of the responses for each individual. Interpretation of the ASC is inferred from the score and pattern of individual responses. Inferences should be confirmed by reference to age, sex, culture, developmental history and clinical interview(s).

NORMATIVE COMPARISONS

The ASC total score provides an estimate of the degree to which the individual has become cohesive according to self-report. Conversion of the ASC total raw score to percentiles facilitates comparing the examinee's score to percentile scores derived from the frequency distribution of the normative sample. Percentiles indicate the percent of persons scoring at or below that score. *T* scores compare an individual’s score relative to the scores of those in the normative sample derived to have a mean of 50 and a standard deviation of 10. For example, a *T* score of 70 would indicate that the respondent’s score is two standard deviations above the normative sample mean.

Table2. ASC Interpretive Categories and Corresponding T Score and Percentile Range

Interpretation	T Score Range	Percentile Score Range
Exceptional cohesion	Above 70	Above 95
Above average cohesion	56 to 70	63 to 95
Within normal limits	45 to 55	22 to 62
Marginal cohesion	40 to 44	10 to 21
Limited cohesion	35 to 39	3 to 9
Absence of cohesion	Below 35	Below 3

A T score of 40 would indicate the respondent's score is one standard deviation below the mean. Scores between the 45th and 55th percentile are considered within the normal range of cohesion; the higher the ASC total score, the greater the level of cohesion. Table 2 gives the interpretative ranges for the ASC, T scores, and percentile equivalents for raw scores.

The normative sample consisted of 188 persons with 117 females and 71 males between the ages of 23 and 57. All participants spoke and read English. There were 101 married persons with an average of 1.2 children; the rest were single or divorced. No one in the sample was diagnosed with a mental condition, or addicted to drugs or alcohol.

Internal reliability of the ASC using Cronbach's α was computed to be 0.99 with WINSTEPS (Linacre, 2010). This high level of reliability was achieved by constructing the ASC items to follow very exacting specifications derived from the theories of Kohut and Bowen, and by writing and constructing a unified sequential scale of items. These items, their categories, and item stems are given in Figures 5 and 6.

Validity is a unified concept, but was assessed in four ways: (1) clinician assessment of the quality of items according to the two theoretical viewpoints, (2) correlation of the ASC to the PAM™ (Abidin & Konold, 2001) and the LOCA (Langenbrunner, Cox, & Cherry, 2013), (3) comparison of scores on the ASC for experimental and control subjects participating in treatment, and (4) Rasch determination of a unidimensional scale composed of the 30 ASC items.

Clinician feedback came from faculty who teach advanced clinical courses, and from clinical staff in mental health agencies. The questionnaire was judged "user friendly." Early feedback resulted in changes to item framing and word choice. One reviewer was "very skeptical about the value of any quantitative data to address complex issues." Several reviewers indicated the respondent's state of mind in a particular setting on a particular day could be an important matter to consider when interpreting scores. "Thoroughness, without excessive length" was noted, and "a good representation" of the concepts from the two theories indicated by several reviewers. Several persons indicated eagerness to implement the measure into their practices. All reviewers agreed that the items addressed the positions of Bowen and Kohut. These clinician assessments of the ASC address what some call content validity.

The Parenting Alliance Measure™ (PAM™, Abidin & Konold, 2001) measures how cooperative, communicative, and mutually respectful couples report about caring for their children. The 20-item PAM™ was based on 1,224 parents of children from the general population, and a clinical sample of 272 parents of children diagnosed with ADHD, CD, ODD. Internal consistency was reported to be .97 with test-retest reliability reported at .80.

The Level of Conflict Assessment of Divorcing or Separating Couples (LOCA, Langenbrunner, Cox, & Cherry, 2013) is a 25-item instrument that measures divorcing individuals' perceived levels of inter-parental conflict. The LOCA was administered to 484 individuals with internal consistency reliability of the scale reported as .94.

The correlation between the PAM™ and LOCA was -0.67. These two instruments are inversely related whereby an increase in PAM™ scores for cooperation, communication and respect correlates to an increase in LOCA scores indicating inter-parental conflict.

Table3. ASC: Two-Sample t-Test Difference in Gain Scores Assuming Unequal Variances

	Control group	Experimental group
Mean Gain Score	0	11
Variance	108.53	177.07
SD	10.42	13.30
N	16	16
df	30	
t computed	-2.60	
P	0.01	
t critical two-tail, p = .05	2.05	
Decision	Statistically significant	
Cohen's <i>d</i> (effect size)	0.93	
Power	0.74	

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The correlation between the LOCA and the ASC was 0.18, and the correlation between the PAM™ and the ASC was -0.09. These low correlations between the ASC and the LOCA, and the PAM, are interpreted to indicate that the ASC is associated with a different area of investigation from that measured by the other two instruments (LOCA and PAM™).

Data were collected from the 16 females and the 16 males for a pretest-posttest measure of gain for persons engaged in a marital treatment program. The ASC was found to be statistically significant with regard to the gain scores computed between the experimental (treatment condition) and a control group. Treatment outcome was positive as determined by improvement in gain scores for the experimental group as measured by the ASC. Table 3 gives this information.

Factor analysis using WINSTEPS (Linacre, 2010) and a screen test (Cattell, 1966) indicated the first factor, ASC measure produced 71.4% of the total variance. The variance for residual factors showed decreasing variance of 3%, 2.2%, 2.0%, 1.9%, 1.6%, etc. indicating the ASC Measure dominates in the total measured variance.

Figure 3 indicates the uni-dimensionality of the ASC and the cohesion of the ASC items around a central concept of self cohesion. The ASC logistic measure is indicated by the horizontal axis and the item outfit (Rasch measurement item fit) indicated on the vertical axis. The ASC items are designated by letters in this figure to avoid confusion when plotting one and two-digit item numbers close together. (The code to these letters is given in column 4 of Table 4.) Table 3 also indicates the person logistic measure, item number, and category associated to the letter code.

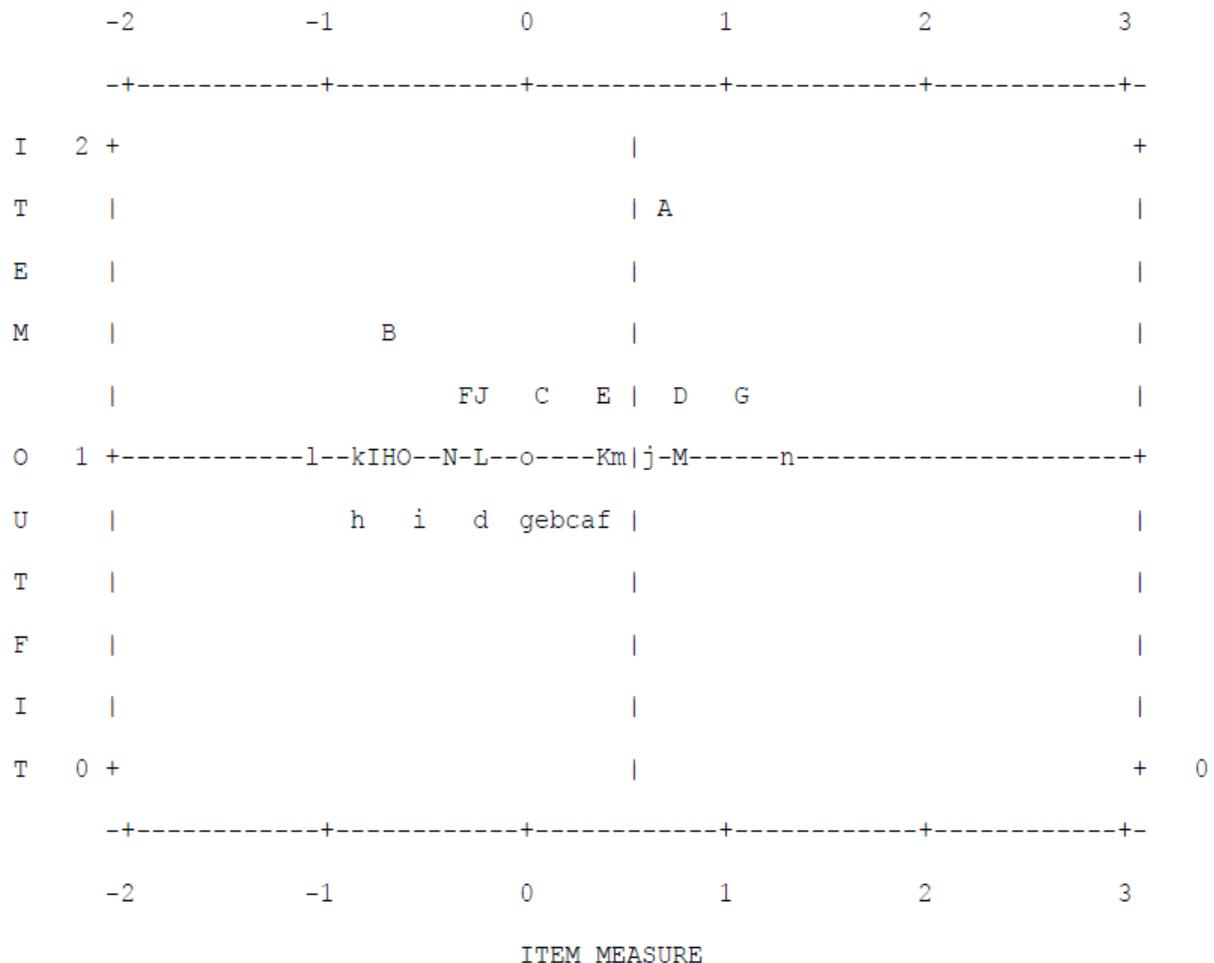


Figure3. Unidimensionality of the ASC

All the ASC items, except for A, can be seen to hover around the center horizontal line (identified as 1.0) along the item logistic measure. Deviations beyond 0.0 and 2.0 are considered statistically significant, but none of the items (even A) reached this criterion (Wright & Stone. 1979; 1996; 2006). The ASC can therefore be considered a unidimensional variable measuring a single concept composed of the items constructed to integrate the theoretical aspects of the Kohut and Bowen strategies.

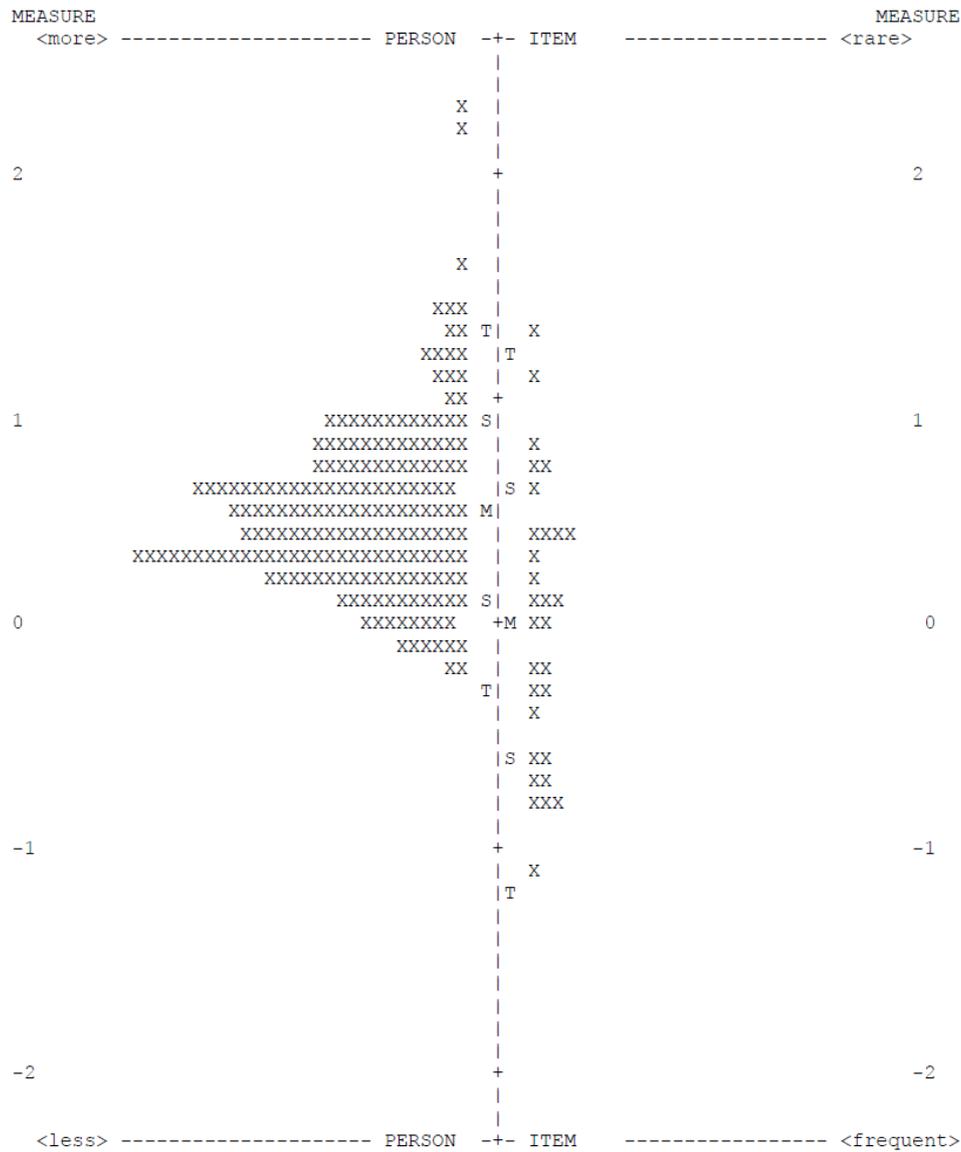
Table4. ASC: Item Statistics for the Kohut and Bowen Item Categorization

MEASURE	INFIT MNSQ	OUTFIT MNSQ	ENTRY NUMBER	ITEM
-.80	1.14	1.03	A 8	8Patterns
-.85	.98	.94	B 13	13Structure
-.34	1.09	1.13	C 25	25Structure
-.69	1.33	1.32	D 30	30Empathy
-1.10	.99	.92	E 23	23Empathy
.23	.82	.80	F 19	19Patterns
.07	1.31	1.30	G 26	26Self-Differentiation
-.24	1.01	1.07	H 16	16Emotion-Supression
-.85	.92	.89	I 12	12Empathy
.02	.95	1.01	J 29	29Self-Cohesion
.11	.80	.78	K 24	24Circular-Causality
.08	.83	.84	L 5	5Structure
.42	.85	.87	M 7	7Self-Differentiation
.27	.74	.73	N 6	6Circular-Causality
.75	1.20	1.28	O 11	11Emotion-Supression
1.10	1.08	1.19	o 17	17Self-Differentiation
.38	1.23	1.25	n 15	15Circular-Causality
.76	1.02	1.04	a 10	10Idealization
.36	1.09	1.09	b 2	2Triangulation
.42	.98	1.00	c 3	3Idealization
-.57	.94	.87	d 4	4Twinship
.00	.88	.89	e 20	20Idealization
-.69	1.16	1.02	f 1	1Mirroring
.64	.96	.95	g 28	28Triangulation
1.33	.96	1.01	h 21	21Triangulation
-.41	1.02	.99	i 14	14Mirroring
.72	1.82	1.78	j 27	27Circular-Causality
-.21	.82	.81	k 18	18Twinship
-.31	1.20	1.17	l 9	9Self-Cohesion
-.61	1.01	.94	m 22	22Self-Cohesion

Table 4 gives the ASC measure in column1. Columns 2 and 3 give the fit statistics. Values at or beyond 2.0 indicate significant misfit, but no items meet this criteria. Column 4 gives the items names given in Figure 5. Columns 5 and 6 give the item number and item stem.

Figure 4 is a Map of the Persons and Items for the standardization sample. Each "X" on the item side (right) indicates an item. Each "X" on the person side (left) indicates a person. Items and persons are located by their logistic measure (rather than raw score) as indicated by the numerals at the far left and far right sides. The map shows the relative balance between the calibrated items and logistic person scores. Six person scores are beyond the item range for high values because these persons scored very high cohesion levels not reached by the majority of the sample. Nine items indicating extremely low cohesion were below the entire sample.

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M = mean

S = one standard deviation

T = two standard deviations

Figure4. ASC: Map of Persons and Items.

Item #	Category	Item Stem
1	Mirroring	- support and encouragement from others.
14	Mirroring	- share my feelings.
4	Twinship	- seek out people.
18	Twinship	- part of a group.
3	Idealization	- seek role models.
10	Idealization	- need to feel supported.
20	Idealization	- prefer people like me.
12	Empathy	- listen to the needs.
23	Empathy	- attentive to fulfilling others.
30	Empathy	- feel pain of others.
9	Self Cohesion	- express true emotions.
22	Self Cohesion	- more to give when feeling good.
29	Self Cohesion	- found balance between needing being needed.

Figure5. Categorical Form of the Assessment of Self Cohesion (ASC): Self Psychology.

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Figure 5 gives the theoretical category for items of the ASC related to terms from Kohut’s theory of Self Psychology with a corresponding item stem. The stems are arranged by the theoretical categories derived from Kohut’s theory of Self Psychology as applied to the ASC.

Item #	Category	Item Stem
2	Triangulation	- express my emotions through others.
21	Triangulation	- ask others to express my thoughts and feelings.
28	Triangulation	- communicate best with help.
8	Patterns	- notice the role I play.
19	Patterns	- notice patterns from my family of origin.
5	Structure	- the person who must make adjustments.
13	Structure	- aware of roles people have.
25	Structure	- role is clear.
6	Circular Causality	- behavior is shaped by others.
15	Circular Causality	- know who is to blame.
24	Circular Causality	- influence the behaviors of others.
27	Circular Causality	- parent who is responsible.
11	Emotional Suppression	- do not express emotions.
16	Emotional Suppression	- keep control of emotions.
7	Differentiation of Self	- notice stress around me.
17	Differentiation of Self	- responsible for reactions of others.
26	Differentiation of Self	- attached to family.

Figure6. *Categorical Form of the Assessment of Self Cohesion (ASC): Family Systems Theory.*

Figure 6 gives the theoretical category for each item of the ASC related to Bowen’s Family Systems Theory with a corresponding stem. The item stems are arranged by the theoretical categories derived from Bowen’s Family Systems Theory as applied to the ASC. Figures 5 and 6 are useful for diagnosing responses to individual items related to the concepts measured by the 30 items of the Assessment of Self Cohesion (ASC). These terms are conceptualized as follows:

Empathy – Items 12, 23 and 30

Kohut’s operational definition of empathy referred to "the capacity to think and feel oneself into the inner life of another person" (Kohut, 1984, p. 82). Empathy allows one to know another’s experience without misplacing one’s objectivity. Derived from the German term *Einfühlung*, empathy developed to mean "feeling into" or "searching one's way" into the knowledge of another (Basch, 1983). Empathy is experience-near observation.

Mirroring - Items 1 and 14

Mirroring is a self object need to be admired for one’s qualities and accomplishments. Kohut (1971) stated that children need a caregiver who holds them in positive regard, admires them, rejoices in their progress, and congratulates their accomplishments. A healthy sense of grandiosity is achieved when this self object need is met and valued by others producing pride in one’s qualities and accomplishments (1971).

Twinship – Items 4 and 18

The self object need of twinship is a need to feel analogous to others. This need is met by engaging in relationships with those to whom one feels similar. Children need a caregiver to whom they have a

sense of belonging. When a caregiver protects a child, the self object need of twinship is satisfied. When an individual has the need of twinship met, the result is a sense of community and a sense of bonding.

Idealization – Items 3, 10 and 20

Idealization is a self object need that is met when a sense of merging with idealized self objects is achieved. Kohut (1971) identified the need for children to hold onto an image of an idealized caregiver. When a child feels respect and admiration for the admired parent, and the child identifies with the caregiver, this identification helps the child to develop in a secure manner because the child internalizes the principles.

Self Cohesion – Items 9, 22 and 29

Self object needs must be met for a cohesive self to be established. Self cohesion is achieved through innumerable transmuting internalizations of self object functions into self functions (Kohut, 1971). A healthy and cohesive self-structure is the outcome of normal development along the lines of grandiosity, idealization, and connectedness dimensions (Kohut, 1971, 1977, 1984).

Circular Causality – Items 6, 15, 24 and 27

In Bowen’s Family Systems Theory circular causality describes successive events; each event caused by the previous one (Bowen, 2008). The goal is not to find blame, but to have family members acknowledge the problem, and work toward improved communication and resolution.

Triangulation – Items 2, 21 and 28

Triangulation is a network or a behavior pattern that typically involves a pair of family members incorporating or rejecting a third family member. Cross-generational coalitions can also develop (Bowen, 1966, 1978). A triangle describes a three-person relationship system whereby the triangle becomes the “molecule” of larger emotional systems because it is the smallest stable relationship. Triangles exert social control by putting one person outside or bringing an outsider in when tension escalates between two persons. Increasing the number of triangles may stabilize tension. Marital therapy uses the triangle to provide a neutral third party capable of relating to both sides of a conflict.

Emotional Suppression – Items 11 and 16

Virginia Satir described emotional suppression as the cause of family problems (1972). An emotion regulation strategy occurs when true emotions are stifled, and pushed out of mind. Occasionally, when the strategy is used, negative consequences may not be the result. Unfortunately, when emotions are pushed away frequently, or all of the time, emotional suppression is likely to produce problems within the family.

Patterns – Items 8 and 19

“Bowen’s focus was on patterns that develop in families in order to defuse anxiety” (Brown, 1999, p. 95). Behavior patterns of family members tend to maintain predictable states within the boundaries of the system. “The Bowenian framework means that the therapist helps clients to look not only at patterns of relating over the generations but also to critique the roles they occupy in relationships (Brown, p. 100).

Structure - Items 5, 13 and 25

Bowen’s Family Systems Theory focused on the structure and workings of the system for the individual to move forward in a different systemic role. The multigenerational structure of a family system, roles and patterns offer information about the structure to assess and explain how each family member copes with anxiety.

Differentiation of Self - Items 7, 17 and 26

The first concept of differentiation of self entails being able to separate feelings from thoughts. Bowen’s progressive term, differentiation of self, leads to internal interplay between autonomy and connection. Fusion occurs when one person holds others responsible for how lives evolve. Fusion also involves difficulty separating one’s own feelings and experiences from the feelings and experiences of others. The less developed a person’s “self,” the more impact others have on functioning and control. “The level of differentiation is the degree to which one self fuses or merges into another self in a close

emotional relationship” (Bowen, 1988). Reacting to conflict in a calm manner, accepting responsibility for the role played, and responding differently in the future are behaviors that represent differentiation.

Construct validity (Cronbach & Meehl, 1955) addresses "the degree to which individuals possess some trait or quality (construct) presumed to be reflected in test performance" (APA, 1954, p. 13). Messick (1995, p. 741) opines, “Unified validity integrates considerations of content, criteria, and consequences into a construct framework for the empirical testing of rational hypotheses about score meaning and theoretically relevant relationships, including those of an applied and a scientific nature.” Lumsden and Ross (1973, p. 192) specify, “The equivalence validation programme requires: (a) test unidimensionality, (2) operational criteria for all the theoretical terms used to describe the tests, and (3) multiple theoretical likages for the theoretical items.”

Development of the ASC has followed these specifications. As with all instruments, the ASC will require further study. However, in addition to total scores, the clients' responses to the Bowen and Kohut coded items can prove extremely helpful to clinicians seeking to understand the behaviors of their clients. With that said the clinician's ability to create treatment plans, and direct a healing experience for clients by using the ASC can lead to differentiation of self together with an increased level of self cohesion.

SUMMARY

The 30 items of the ASC were designed to assess client responses with respect to the theoretical concepts of Kohut’s theory of Self Psychology, and Bowen’s Family Systems Theory. The ASC was found to have very high internal reliability in a standardization sample of 188 clients. Validity was estimated by evaluating the item content by clinicians, correlating the ASC to two contrasting instruments, and substantiating the uni-dimensional design of the ASC to support construct validity. Total scores can be related to the standardization sample, but even more useful is the ability to use the key concepts of Bowen and Kohut to diagnose client responses related to specific items.

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