"We're not speaking any more": A cross-cultural study of intergenerational cut-offs

LAUREN R. UNGAR[1] AND RAMASWAMI MAHALINGAM[1]
[1]*University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI, USA*

Abstract. This study of individuals in the U.S. and Tamil Nadu, India, examines the reasons given for voluntary limitations on contact between adult children and their parents ("cut-offs"). We examine the possibly that these breeches occur as a solution to the problem of negative social relationships by looking at the different cultural contexts of the U.S. and India. We challenge Bowen's (1978) assertion that intergenerational cut-offs always occur in the vain attempt to promote differentiation and propose a system for categorizing the reasons given for cut-offs, and explore the research and practice implications of the findings. Although based on a limited sample, this paper provides an important contribution to this understudied aspect of interpersonal relationships.

Introduction and literature review

Over the past several years, there has been considerable interest in social support as a buffer against negative outcomes to stressful life events (see Antonucci, 2001, for a recent review of this literature). A key social relationship is that between parents and children (Troll, 1994; Roberts and Bengston, 1993). In most families around the world, relationships between parents and their offspring remain important throughout life. However, the quantity and quality of contact between adults and their parents varies greatly, and more contact does not necessarily lead to a greater sense of well-being. (Crohan & Antonnucci, 1989; Lee & Ellithorpe, 1982).

There is increasing recognition that not all support is positive. Researchers are coming to acknowledge that social contact with family and friends is not always pleasant or helpful (Antonnucci, 1991; Ingersoll-Dayton, Morgan & Antonucci, 1997; Rook, 1984; Rook, 1992). These researchers refer to contact with members of a social network that have an aversive effect on the individual's well being (such as criticism, or excessive demands) as *negative social support*. They have found that negative social support can make stressful life events even more stressful. (Rook, 1984; Rook, 2001; Ingersoll-Dayton, Morgan & Antonucci, 1997). One possible solution to the problem of negative

social support is for an individual who is negatively impacted by contact with a friend or family member to withdraw from that relationship. This paper examines situations of voluntary limit or elimination of contact between parents and children. Although based on a small convenience sample, this study begins to explore the issues of why intergenerational cut-offs occur though interviews with individuals who have chosen to cut off from their families.

Relationships between parents and children are among the most psychologically charged (Troll, 1984; Roberts and Bengston, 1993). However, only as adults do most individuals have the option of stepping back from or severing the parent/child relationship. Therefore, this paper will focus on relationships between parents and adult children in which at least one member of the dyad has decided to limit or discontinue contact. Using the terminology of American family therapist Murray Bowen, (1978), we call these *cut-off* relationships or simply *cut-offs*.

Bowen and his followers (e.g., Kerr, 1981, Teitleman, 1987) are the main authors who have written about cut-offs. Bowen theorized that cut-offs were an attempt by adult children who had not separated sufficiently from their parents to maintain some boundaries. (Bowen calls this process differentiation.) Unable to differentiate from parents while maintaining contact, adult children try to distance themselves from their parents by limiting or eliminating contact with them. Bowen perceives these attempts as inevitably doomed to failure, because he believes that avoiding physical contact cannot lead to emotional distance. Instead, he counsels his patients to re-enter the family system while changing their role or behavior within that system. This paper questions Bowen's assertion that cut-offs are always negative.

We will be looking at the conscious motivation of the individual that initiated the cut-off. What did he or she hope to communicate or accomplish by limiting or refusing communication? One possibility is the avoidance of negative social support. Another, as Bowen suggests, is to achieve differentiation from the family of origin. Other possibilities are also explored in this paper.

Cross-cultural issues

If we accept Bowen's theory that cut-offs occur in the service on the developmental task of young people to become differentiated from their parents, it makes sense to ask whether and why cut-offs occur in a society where there are no such expectations. Tamil Nadu is one such society.

Tamil Nadu is a state in southern India with a population of 50 million people. Ethnographic reports of Tamil Nadu delineate the central role of families in structuring both the cognitive, emotional and moral development of a person (Trawick, 1990; Wadley, 1991). Anthropological reports of India highlight the

centrality of family in the lives of Indians (Wadley, 1991). Indian feminists, such as Lakshmi, (1984), report that, in contrast to Western notions of self, Indian family systems nurture the development of a self through realization of various role-bound obligations, particularly for women.

In contrast to American families, a large number of Indian families are joint families and are patrilocal (typically, the wife moves in with her husband's family). Young adults seldom live apart from their family of origin before marriage, and major geographical moves away from the extended family are still an exception. Most marriages are arranged by parents. Sons are expected to take care of the parents during their old age.

While research on family therapy has primarily focused on Western cultures, recent developments in cultural psychology (Shweder, 1990) call for a comparative cultural perspective to understand the dynamic nature of family relations in shaping one's sense of self, agency and role obligations (see Markus, Mullally, & Kitayama, 1997). For instance, Markus et al., (1997) argue that cultural differences between Asians and Americans are seen in two different concepts of self, nurtured and valued by the respective cultures. Among Americans, the dominant mode of self is the "autonomous," bounded, notion of self, characterized as an intradependent self, whereas Asian cultures favor a notion of self that is embedded and expressed through various role obligations and characterized as an independent notion of self. Similarly characterizations of East-West cultural differences are also portrayed as individualistic and collectivistic societies that correspond to independent notions of self (also see Kakar, 1978; Roland, 1996; Triandis, 1995).

The cross-cultural comparison of cut-offs between Indian and American families is important for two reasons. First, we can examine the role of family type (joint versus nuclear) in initiating and maintaining a cut-off. Second, we explore whether culture-bound notions of self (intradependent vs. independent) coalesce in different contextual configurations that trigger cut-offs in the U.S. and in India.

Research questions

This paper explores explanations people give for limiting or discontinuing contact with their parents or their adult offspring. Particular attention is paid to protection from negative social support and/or achievement of differentiation as possible motivations for cutoffs. Comparison between cut-offs in U.S families versus those in a traditional society in Southern India allows us to explore the role of cultural expectations (including family type and notions of self) in the initiation of cut-offs.

Description of the study

Participants

For purposes of this study, all relationships in which at least one family member makes a choice (and acts on it) to limit or discontinue contact with one or more family members are defined as "cut-off." Since this paper focuses on intergenerational cut-offs, the focus is on families where parents cut themselves off from their children, or children from their parents.

In the United States, subjects were recruited via church newsletters or announcements in churches and electronic mail news groups, or they were personal acquaintances of the author who heard about the study and offered to participate. Four of those interviewed were parents whose children had cut off from them. Six were children who had cut off from their parents. Three of the respondents were individuals who spoke about cut-offs between their parents and their grandparents.

The American sample consisted of seven women and six men, ranging in age from 21 to 75. Seven participants were interviewed in person, five over electronic mail, and one by phone. Almost all were White (one was Asian). Most participants were highly educated (nine had doctoral degrees or were in the process of getting them.) Most were of Protestant background, with one Catholic and one Jewish person. Most were born in the Midwest but two were born in Britain, and one in Asia. At the time of the study, six lived in the East, five in the West, and three in the Midwest. All participants lived in urban areas.

In order to look at the effects of culture and expectations of family roles with regard to cut-offs, seven individuals in a medium-sized town in Tamil Nadu, Southern India, who had also experienced a cut-off in their families were interviewed. Tamil Nadu in many ways remains a traditional society. Parents usually arrange marriages, and a bride moves from her parents' house to live with her parents-in-law, brothers-in-law and their families, as well as her husband (a "joint family" system). The two cultures are compared because they exemplify nuclear and joint family systems as a dominant family structure.

All of the Indian participants lived in the Tamil Nadu province in Southern India and were recruited through word of mouth. They ranged in age from 19 to 60. All were of Asian Indian ethnic background, and had born and raised in India. Six were Hindu, one Muslim. All had at least eight years of schooling, and two had completed college. The four married women lived with their husband's families and one woman lived with her family of origin. One woman lived alone with her nuclear family. One man lived with his sister and her family.

Method

A qualitative clinical interview method was chosen for the study (Gilgun, 1995). In the pilot phase, six U.S. participants and one Indian participant known to the interviewer shared their views of reasons for cut-offs in their families in unstructured interviews. We derived an interview protocol and a classification system for responses based on the transcriptions of these interviews.

Subsequent interviews consisted of a semi-structured series of questions and follow-up probes designed to encourage participants to reflect on issues related to cut-offs within their families. Both current and past cut-offs were discussed in detail. Answers to the following questions constitute the focus of this paper: What triggered any cut-offs that occurred? What did the initiator of the cut-off hope to accomplish? Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Edited transcripts of the interviews were coded according to the classification system developed with the pilot data. A second researcher also classified a portion of the interviews. The inter-rater reliability was 87%. These groupings were used to look at the interruptions in family relationships and the reasons given for them.

Results

Reasons for cut-offs

Reasons for cut-offs fell into three basic categories. These categories seemed relevant for both the Indian and the American participants, though there are some cultural differences, which are discussed in the following section. The most common reason was to express *moral outrage* at some action or inaction by the family member. The second basic category was *self-protection* in which the person initiating the cut-off sought to protect herself or a significant other. The third category was *loyalty conflict cut-offs*, in which people cut off from one family member at the insistence of another. These are not clearly distinct categories. Often, cut-offs could be seen as belonging in more than one category, or cut-offs in different categories were triggered by similar events.

Moral outrage cut-offs

Among the Americans, of those in the moral outrage category (who expressed anger through their cut-offs) included many children of divorced parents. It

may be an artifact of the particular cohort, but these were generally young people whose fathers had left their mothers for other women. As one such son put it, "I tried to have as little contact with my Dad as possible. I knew that he had hurt my Mom and that made me mad at him." A father who had left his children's mother after about 20 years of marriage spoke of a very angry letter he had received from his daughter.

> Before the divorce, my daughter and I had always been close. It was like when I left her Mom that didn't fit the picture she had of me. Then she started to think of all the things I had done in her life that she didn't like. She came up with plenty, and decided I must always have been a pretty lousy person. She wrote me a long letter with all of these things she didn't like and finished it by saying she didn't want to see me again . . . and she hasn't.

In other cases, a cut-off was precipitated by another kind of action that a child or parent found morally unacceptable.

Moral outrage cut-offs were particularly prevalent among the Indian participants when a child failed to live up to the parent's expectations. An Indian man who had managed to work himself up from poverty to moderate financial success had set his heart on his oldest son studying engineering at one of India's top universities. When the son failed the math section of his college entrance exams, his father said, "Get out of my sight, I never want to speak to you again." The son continues to live at his parents' house while he studies computing at a technical school, but he and his father do not speak directly to each other.

Another Indian son cut off from his parents to express outrage at their interference with his choice of a bride. His father, who was a successful landowner, tried unsuccessfully to arrange an advantageous match for his youngest son, but whatever girl his father would suggest he would refuse. While the young man was in college he happened to meet a young, lower-class woman who climbed over a police barricade to bring water to a victim. He fell in love with the young woman for her selfless generosity. She also fell in love with him and they made plans to elope. Someone overheard them talking and notified the young man's father. On the very day the couple was to elope, thugs hired by the young man's father went to the young woman's house and beat her so severely that she ended up in the hospital. The young man was told that his plans had been discovered and that his sweetheart was dead. In a rage with his father for what he thought was his sweetheart's death, the young man ran away and became a taxi driver. Under pressure from her family, the young woman married someone of her own class after her recovery.

The young man went to live with his married sister, who tried to bring about reconciliation between her brother and her father. However, the young man remained steadfast in his rage. This participant's story is different from those of Americans who wanted to separate from family, in that he would have been happy to bring his chosen bride into the family fold.

Protection cut-offs

Another large group of participants was those who sought to protect self, parent, or offspring. Among the Americans, this group included many people who had suffered physical, sexual or emotional abuse. Participants who had been abused as children left home as early as they could (often, in this sample, to go to college) in order to get away from the abuse. Later in life, when asked why they remained cut-off, they said things like "Why bother?" or "My Mom is not someone I would care to know." Although they did not specifically say they avoided contact because it was aversive, these participants can be seen as cutting off to avoid negative social support. Others kept away from their abusive parents in order to protect their children. A woman who had been sexually abused by her father avoided contact with him in order to protect her own children from also suffering abuse. No Indians reported histories of abuse.

Another self-protection motive for cut-off was protection from family members' disappointment at one's failure to live up to their family's expectations (or what the individual perceives as their expectations). An Asian student who had come to the U.S. to study at great financial and emotional sacrifice from his family said he cut off from them when his studies were not going well. Another participant, a gay man, said he cut off from his parents to protect them from knowledge of his homosexuality.

Other American children or parents cut off to protect themselves from financial obligation/expectation/exploitation. They feared family members would be a financial, psychological, or physical burden. For example, a mother of a severely developmentally disabled child feared that if she saw her institutionalized daughter the daughter would want to come back home to live with her parents. The mother was concerned about the financial obligation for her care, as well as the constant attention her daughter would require. A child of alcoholic parents avoided contact with them because he did not want to assume any kind of responsibility for them.

Another reason for cut-off is protection from interference, control and/or criticism. Two Americans (but none of the Indians) gave explanations that were clearly in line with Bowen's (1978) theory that cut-offs occur when there is a lack of differentiation. They could also be seen as avoiding the

negative social support from their parents' criticisms and attempts at control. One, an oldest daughter in her late twenties was cut-off from her mother for several months. She said "Mom crowds me too much and gets too smothery." This same woman said "Each time I see my mother I have a lower opinion of myself and my feathers are ruffled. Every conversation becomes a battle for my privacy . . . Mom has a way of making me feel she's co-opted my life . . . giving indirect insult." She gave the example of her mother telling her "How nice that even at this weight that dress suits you," and telling her brother in her presence "I'm so glad you've got a date; at least one of my children has a life."

Another woman who spoke of her battle for independence was a woman in her forties who had immigrated to the U.S. from Europe with her husband. She said she had recently decided to stop sending letters and making visits to Europe. Although as a child, she had struggled desperately to win approval from her traditional, Catholic parents, she had finally concluded that it was impossible for her simultaneously to be herself and to win their approval. In her early twenties, she married a man her parents disapproved of, knowing that the marriage would likely lead to a cut-off. A few years later she reconciled with her parents. Ironically, although he was different from her parents in race, ethnicity and religion, her husband was as conservative as they were. She again became cut off from her parents after she divorced her husband.

> I know that [my parents] love me. They care for me. They wanted to do the best, but they had not a clue of the hurt they were giving. It's a very difficult situation. I know they love me, but you know those trees that grow around other trees and suffocate them? It's a love, definitely, but it's a love that suffocates. I just can't breathe. When you are in the middle of it, you don't have choices.

Another protection-related reason for cut-off is a daughter's growing dissatisfaction with her family role. Those in this category included an American daughter who was responsible for many household tasks, as well as for providing other kinds of support to her parents. This woman married at a young age to escape from her family. Another American woman, who described herself as a "buffer child," said she was constantly told of each parent's shortcomings by the other parent. She moved to a geographically distant location for a number of years. When she returned to her hometown and again found herself caught between her parents, she refused to see either of them.

One of the Indian participants told a somewhat similar story. She was the oldest of seven girls born to an authoritarian, Muslim father. The father was very disappointed that he had no sons. His communication with his daughters

was mostly limited to abrupt commands. One day, when the participant was in her teens, she was washing clothes as her father sat nearby washing vegetables. Her father gruffly told her to move back so she would not get soap in the vegetables. The ensuing quarrel led to the daughter and the father not speaking to each other until the daughter's wedding day some seven years later, even though the daughter continued to reside with her parents. (The daughter's uncle played the role usually played by the father in arranging her marriage.) When asked why that particular interaction led to a cut-off, the daughter said, "I don't know. Maybe I was getting too old for him to order me around like that, or maybe I was just tired or having a bad day." She acknowledged that the initial interaction was no different from hundreds earlier in which she had merely complied with her father's commands. Unlike the Americans, who spoke in terms of privacy and independence, this woman did not speak of needing to separate from her father.

Loyalty-conflict cut-offs

In cut-off situations, a cut-off between two family members often expands as other family members take sides in the conflict. In our study, there were two families in which one spouse insisted on the other spouse cutting off from his or her own family. We call these "loyalty-conflict cut-offs."

An American woman confided in her sister-in-law her concern that her newly adopted baby might have some learning problems, insisting that her mother-in-law not be told. When the woman found that her confidence had been broken, she cut off from her husband's family and insisted that her husband do likewise because "They deserted me in my hour of need."

An American father-in -law had a quarrel with his son-in-law that resulted in the daughter and her children also becoming cut off from her parents. The father was an elderly farmer who had accumulated a considerable fortune, and frequently made demands on his children and in-laws as a condition of their inheriting his wealth. He announced to his son-in -law, "If I am too ill or weak to bring in the corn crop, you will do so for me." The son-in-law refused to make an unconditional promise to do so. The ensuing quarrel led to a separation between the daughter's nuclear family and her family of origin that lasted until the father's death. (Another child received the inheritance.)

Loyalty conflict cut-offs also occurred in Indian families. A married Indian woman became cut off from her father following a conflict between her husband and her father. At the husband's request, the father sold some land the daughter had inherited. The husband had asked his father-in-law to sell the land at a certain price. He later found that his father-in law had sold the land at a higher price, but had kept the difference for himself as commission. While the

father-in-law said he had done as his son-in-law asked, the son-in-law thought it was inappropriate to charge a commission to a family member. He stopped speaking to his father-in-law and insisted his wife do likewise. There were no visits between the woman and her parents for nearly two years. The cut-off between the woman and her father was ended when her brother's wife invited the woman and her family to a celebration for the birth of the brother's oldest son.

Although it is typical for a wife to go to live with the husband's family, contact between the wife and her parents is usually maintained. However, in cut-off situations, contact may be severed for a period of time. Because wives typically live with their husband's family, cut-offs involving a married daughter in India have less impact on the individual's day-to-day life than cut-offs involving a married son or a daughter-in-law.

Where living alone is not an option, people may try to express outrage or maintain distance from a parent by continuing to live with the family while refusing to speak directly to that parent. The Indians were clever at managing at least a symbolic cut-off while continuing to share a household or otherwise maintain contact. Several Indian family members refused to speak directly to each other (e.g., a son saying to his mother in his father's presence, "Tell my father that I am going away next week to my cousin's wedding in Bangalore"). A mother scolded another Indian man, who had been laid off from his job, for sitting around eating dessert instead of looking for a job. Even after he again became employed, the son never ate dessert again at his mother's house.

Discussion

This paper has identified three reasons for intergenerational cut-offs: protecting oneself or others, expressing moral outrage, or choosing other relationships over that with parents in a loyalty-conflict situation. Bowen's theory that cut-offs occur in the service of differentiation was a satisfactory explanation in only a minority of American cases and in no Indian ones. As Bowen would have predicted, it was true that those in this sample who did not see or talk to family members, regardless of the reason, continued to have intense emotional feelings about those they were cut off from. Few participants directly talked of avoiding the aversive emotional effects of contact as a reason for cut-off, though in several situations avoidance of negative interaction was at least a secondary reason.

Neither Bowen's explanation nor one based of avoidance of negative social support was wholly satisfactory. In both cultures, there were other kinds of motivations for cut-offs. Some participants initiated cut-offs in order to express moral outrage or in loyalty-conflict situations; others sought to protect family members from knowledge that would be distressing to them. Although

participants did not say so explicitly, some could be seen as cutting off in order to avoid being a source of negative social support to their family members.

We saw cultural differences manifest in the initiation of cutoffs. We found that in a more traditional society like India, the interaction between moral outrage, loyalty conflict and self-protection cut-offs are more intricately linked to specific cultural dynamics of the family. Where living alone is not an option, people may try to express outrage or maintain distance from a parent by continuing to live with the family while refusing to speak directly to that parent, spouse or sibling. In such situations the cutoff smolders beneath the surface like slow-burning firewood with a veneer of ashes, until a face-saving social occasion arises for reconciliation. For most Indians, having an intradependent rather than an independent notion of self meant that they were less likely to talk about self protection as a reason for cut-offs, and more likely to talk about themselves in relationship to others, using explanations such as saving face or protecting others from disappointment in them.

At the same time, repairing or avoiding cut-offs becomes crucial in a cultural context where leaving the family or independently initiating marriage is not a viable option. Cut-offs in this close family context could be especially stressful to everyone because of the unavoidable everyday contacts between two people who are in conflict. This process often is painful and frustrating, and leaves the individuals feeling helpless.

In the U.S., communicational cut-offs were always accompanied by physical cutoffs. People either left the house or left the town. They sought a new social network in a new place.

We argue that the clinical implications of cut-offs are complex and likely to be different for Americans and Indians. In each situation, individuals must weigh the possible costs and benefits of the cut-off. For Americans, the physical and emotional cut-off can provide the space and time to heal. Hence, the impact on their everyday stress and overall mental health might be lessened. In contrast, cut-offs in India are maintained within the family context where the aggrieved parties depend on each other for a number of their daily needs. If married, they may often have to perform religious rituals during family functions. In those contexts, cut-offs can be a source of everyday stress that might lead to chronic depression.

On the other hand, the creative use of symbolic cut-offs among the Indians allows family members to communicate their dissatisfaction with less drastic interruption of the life of the individual and of the family community. They can maintain their living situation and everyday contact with other family members.

Each culture can learn from the other. In both cultures, individuals should seek to clarify and articulate the reasons for the cut-off to all parties involved

and should consider a range of ways to accomplish these goals, including ways to structure or limit communication. Physical cut-off may be the most appropriate action but it should be a last resort.

Limitations

This is an exploratory study with a small, non-random sample of individuals. Research with a more economically, ethnically, and culturally diverse group would point to ways in which economic and cultural factors interact with cut-offs. The phenomenon noticed in India of people cutting off while continuing to live in the same household might also occur in a U.S. sample of people with more economic limitations. A larger, more diverse sample might uncover additional categories of cut-offs and would likely exhibit different proportions of cut-offs mentioned in this study.

The findings in this study might have been influenced by the recruitment procedure. Those who are cut-off from family but retain no emotional ties might not have been motivated to participate in the study.

The study only looks at participants' conscious, reported motivations. Participants may have had motivations or understandings of which they were unconscious, or which they chose not report.

Perhaps Indian respondents did not mention abuse because of embarrassment, especially given that the researchers personally knew most of the participants. Maybe a larger sample of Indians, or a different context, would include such narratives. It is also possible that, given the pervasive use of physical punishment in both homes and schools in India, participants did not perceive themselves as abused, or that the omnipresence of extended family diffuses potentially abusive situations.

We do not presume that this small sample from one part of one culture within one country represents all "Eastern" cultures. A more diverse international sample would help sort out the factors that are and are not specific to this one group. Additional research is also needed to determine the efficacy of cut-offs, varying family patterns, and means of reconciliation. For example, additional research with this sample (Ungar, 1999), but not reported in this study, suggests that for both Indians and Americans, reconcilliations are likely to occur around major life events such as weddings, illnesses and childbirth.

Directions for future research

The question of whether, when, and to what extent cut-offs are a viable solution to the problem of negative social support is an empirical one, to be answered on the basis of further research, rather than solely on the basis of

theoretical assumptions. Future research on this topic should include large-scale studies looking at the incidence of cut-offs, the chronological ordering of significant life events and changes in relationship status, the effects of cut-offs and reconciliations on the well being of those involved, family patterns in cut-offs and reconciliations, and explanations of what led to or allowed reconciliations. Although this study focused on parent/child cut-offs, it would also be important to study cut-offs in other kinds of family relationships such as with siblings, aunts and uncles.

To develop a deeper understanding of cut-offs, we need to have large-scale cross-cultural studies to examine empirically the prevalence of cut-offs and to correlate the presence of cut-offs with characteristics such as personal authority (Bray, Williamson, & Malone, 1984) and adult attachment measures (Fishler, Sperling & Carr, 1990).

Future research should look at the incidence and types of cut-offs in cultures very different from our own in order to figure out which elements of cut-off have to do with our individualistic, nuclear, family-centered culture, and which if any are common across cultures. To get around the problems inherent in reports based on memory, it is important to include questions about cut-offs in longitudinal research. Reports about cut-offs as they occur could be compared with retrospective accounts.

Conclusions

It would be simplistic to point to any one factor as *the* reason for cut-offs. Even in one relationship, there are often multiple layers of reasons, including the nature of the precipitating event, the history of the relationship, and the stated reasons or objectives of the person initiating the cutoff. Avoiding negative interaction and achieving differentiation are possible motives to be considered and explored, as possible or partial explanations, but should not be understood as *the* reason.

The relevant question, for both researchers and family therapists, seems not to be "Why do cut-offs occur?" but "Why is a cut-off between these people occurring at this time?" In studying cut-offs, it is important to look at the situation from each person's perspective. What was the motivation, and what did each person hope to accomplish through the cut-off? What were the triggers and life changes preceding changes in relationships? Exploring cut-offs in other cultures can help us to better understand both other cultures and our own culture.

It is important to recognize the saliency of cut-offs as an area for future study. We need to study voluntary limits and discontinuities in contact among family members beyond the realm of Bowenian family therapists to make it

a subject of research and discussion among the broader psychological and popular community.

Acknowledgements

References

Antonucci, T.C. (2001). Social relations: An examination of social networks, social support, and sense of control. In R. P. Abeles, M. Gatz, and T. A. Salthouse (Eds.). *Handbook of the psychology of aging*, 5th ed. (pp. 427–453). San Diego: Academic Press.

Bowen, M. (1978). *Family therapy in clinical practice*. New York: Brunner/Mazel.

Bray, J. H., Williamson, D. S., Malone, P. E (1984). Personal authority in the family system: Development of a questionnaire to measure personal authority in intergenerational family processes. *Journal of Marital & Family Therapy* 10:167–178.

Crohan, S., & Antonucci, T. (1989). Friends as a source of social support in old age. In R. Adams & R. Bliezner (Eds.), *Older adult friendship* (pp. 129–146). Newbury Park: Sage.

Fishler, P. H., Sperling, M. B., Carr, A. C. (1990). Assessment of adult relatedness: A review of empirical findings from object relations and attachment theories. *Journal of Personality Assessment.* 55:499–520.

Ingersoll-Dayton, Berit, Morgan, David., Antonucci, T. C. (1997). The effects of positive and negative social exchanges on aging adults. *Journals of Gerontology* 52B:S190–S199.

Kakar, S. (1978). *The inner world: The psychoanalytic study of childhood and society in India.* Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Kerr, M. E. (1981). Family systems theory and therapy. In A. S. Gurman & D. P. Kniskern (Ed.), *Handbook of family therapy* (pp.226–264). New York: Brunner/Mazel.

Lakshmi, C. S. (1984). *Face behind the mask*. Delhi: Vikas Publishing house.

Lee, G., & Ellithorpe, E. (1982). Intergenerational exchange and subjective well-being among the elderly. *Journal of marriage and the family* 44:217–224.

Markus, H. R., Mullally, P. R., & Kitayama, S. (1997). Selfways: Diversity in modes of cultural participation. In U. Neisser (Ed.) *The conceptual self in context: Culture, experience, self-understanding* (pp. 13–61). New York: Cambridge University Press.

Roberts, R., & Bengston, V. (1993). Relationships with parents, self-esteem, and psychological well-being in young adulthood. *Social psychology quarterly*, 56:263–277.

Rook, K. S. (2001). Emotional health and positive versus negative social exchanges: A daily diary analysis. *Applied Developmental Science*; 5:86–97.

Rook, K. S. (1992). Detrimental aspects of social relationships: Taking stock of an emerging literature. In:, H. O. F Veiel. (Ed.) *The meaning and measurement of social support* (pp. 157–169). Washington, DC: Hemisphere Publishing **Corp**

Rook, K. S. (1984). The negative side of social interaction: Impact on psychological well-being. *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology* 46:1097–1108.

Roland, A. (1996). The influence of culture on the self and self-object relationships: An Asian-North American comparison. *Psychoanalytic Dialogues* 6:461–475.

Shweder, R. A. (1990). Cultural psychology-what is it?. In. J.W. Stigler, R.A. Shweder & G. Herdt (Eds.). *Cultural psychology: Essays on comparative human development* (pp. 1–47). New York: Cambridge University Press.

Teitleman, P., ed. (1987). *The therapist's own family: Toward the differentiation of self*. Northvale, New Jersey: Jason Aronson, Inc.

Triandis, H. C. (1995). *Individualism and collectivism*. Boulder, CO: Westview.

Trawick, M. (1990). *Notes on love in a Tamil family*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Troll, L. (1994). Family connectedness of old women: Attachments in later life. In B. Turner & L. Troll (Eds.), *Women growing older: Psychological perspectives*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Ungar, L.R. (1998). We're not speaking any more: A study of individuals' narratives on why intergenerational cut-offs occur. Dissertation Abstracts International: Section B: The Sciences & Engineering; Vol. 59(11-B): Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Microfilms International.

Wadley, S. (1991). The paradoxical powers of Tamil women. In S. Wadley (Ed.), *The powers of Tamil women*, (pp. 153–167). Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University.