

# A Study on the Adjustment to the College Life: Focusing on Mediated Effect of Self-Differentiation

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## Abstract

**Background/Objectives:** To find relationships among stress, self-differentiation, and adjustment to college life in the college students and verify the mediated effect of self-differentiation between stress and adjustment to the college life.

**Method/Statistical Analysis:** Data were collected from 1,192 attending college students and analysed using SPSS Statistics 22. T-test and ANOVA were used to confirm the level of stress by the adjustment level to the college life, differences of self-differentiation, adjustment level to the college life by the levels of stress and self-differentiation.

**Findings:** Even with the same level of stress, there were differences in the adjustment to the college life by degree of self-differentiation. The stress and self-differentiation of the college students were significant predictors for the adjustment to the college life by 15.8%, which showed higher level of the adjustment to the college life as the stress was lower and self-differentiation was higher, demonstrating partial mediated effect of self-differentiation between the stress and adjustment to the college life.

**Improvements/Applications:** Based on these study results, controlling stress by enhancing self-differentiation is considered to be helpful for the adjustment to the college life.

**Keywords:** *Adjustment, College life, Stress, Self-differentiation, College students, Mediation effect.*

## Introduction

Most of the Korean college students experience the life historical process of entrance examination until they enter the colleges. This is the transitional period from the late adolescent to the adult, facing the developmental tasks to have to adapt the new environment of college such as relieving from dependency in the adolescent period and playing a role of adult. Most of the Korean students live

together with their families rather than separating and they are in the situations not to be free from the contexts of families on the multiple issues of adjustments that can occur in the college life such as career development, interpersonal relationship, personality, values, and so on<sup>[1]</sup>. Therefore, well adjustment to the college environment primarily will be the major prerequisite to achieve a variety of developmental tasks which should be acquired by the college life. Multiple experiences in the family environment would work as the variables to adjust to the new environment. For the adjustment to the college life of the students, it is necessary to study the interactions and relationships with various variables in the family environment.

In Korea, Je<sup>[2]</sup> developed the index of self-differentiation in Bowen's theory, demonstrating less interpersonal conflicts as the level of self-differentiation

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was higher, and more interpersonal conflicts and less development of adjustment mechanism as the level of self-differentiation was lower in a study to investigate the relationship between self-differentiation and dysfunctional behaviors. Studies were published on the relationships among the level of self-differentiation, mental health and symptoms of maladjustment, and problematic behaviors in the subjects mainly with adolescents, college students and married men and women. You<sup>[3]</sup> reported that dysfunctional behaviors were generated when family projection was significant, they experienced the emotional disconnection a lot, and family return was severe in a study on the adjustment to the college life and career preparation behaviors by the level of self-differentiation. Park and Jo<sup>[4]</sup> showed in their study on the adjustment to the college life by the level of self-differentiation that well adjustment to the college life as the level of self-differentiation was higher, especially when their ego was integrated, family return was less, they belonged to the nuclear families with well differentiation. Park<sup>[5]</sup> reported relatively higher explanatory power with 30% in the children's self-differentiation for their adjustment to the school lives, demonstrating the influential predictors with differentiation between cognitive and emotional functions, emotional disconnection, and family return.

In summary of the prior studies, the level of self-differentiation could be closely related to the adjustment to the college life. Family functions have been described variously with multiple concepts to explain and evaluate the family dynamics in view of family system.

Kerr and Bowen<sup>[6]</sup> considered the concept to show the degree of individualization in the family system as self-differentiation. Self-differentiation means not only the individual thinking capability upon separating thinking from emotion but also the emotional maturation and degree of individualization from the family in which he or she was born<sup>[7]</sup>. That means, self-differentiation is the course to establish the identity upon individualization from the mass of undifferentiated ego and to acquire freedom in the self-impulsive and emotional thinking and behaviors<sup>[8]</sup>. Kang et al<sup>[9]</sup> reported that the most essential concept in Bowen's family therapy theory was self-differentiation which was related to the control of emotion. Bowen<sup>[7]</sup> suggested that self-differentiated people lived goal-oriented lives since they could respond the stress efficiently upon thinking independently to relieve from the emotional integration.

Considering adjustment as a series of processes that individuals control themselves and change the environment so as to lower the imbalance or discomfort factors between them and environment and to live their lives with balanced ones upon accepting a variety of desires in the society, the individuals can solve the conflicts by themselves being independence from their parents emotionally in any difficult situations if their egos are differentiated as healthy and matured personalities. Being independence itself means to transit into the actionable state as the independent individual. Balanced adjustment to the environment is possible only in case that emotional support from the families and individualization are performed together since the most active independence enables when it is performed based on the emotional stability.

Self-differentiation which will be discussed in this study implicates the directly opposed concept as well as those to facilitate complementarily, therefore, it is necessary to review the issues of development how they are related with the psychosocial adjustment in view of family system including the family relationship. In this respect, this study is to investigate whether the level of self-differentiation perceived by the college students mediates the stress and adjustment to the college life. The objective of this study is to provide with the fundamental data to prepare the alternatives for effective adjustment to the college life considering the level of self-differentiation in the college education and counseling.

## Method

The survey was conducted with structured questionnaires in the subjects with 1,192 college students who understood its purposes and consented the participation in the study. A total of 1,104 survey sheets was used as the final analysis excluding the data with insincere responses and abnormal standardized residual values over  $\pm 3$ .

In the analyses of the Research, an index of college life adjustment modified by Kim<sup>[10]</sup> with existing indexes<sup>[11-13]</sup> was used including three sub-domains (adjustment to the study; adjustment to the society; and college environment and general adjustment) and its Cronbach  $\alpha$  was .85. An index of college life stress developed by Chon and Kim<sup>[14]</sup> was used including eight sub-domains (economic problems, relationships with the opposite sex, relationships with professors,

relationships with friends, career problems, values, and study). It contained 50 questionnaires of 3-point-scale meaning higher experience of college life stress as the score was higher, and the reliability on the sub-domains of stress was .82-.89 in this study. Self-differentiation index developed by Je<sup>[2]</sup> based on Bowen’s family system theory was used to measure the level of self-differentiation, including 5 sub-domains (cognitive versus emotional function, ego-integration, family projection process, emotional disconnection, and family return). It contained 36 questionnaires of 4-point-scale meaning higher level of self-differentiation as the score was higher. Its Cronbach  $\alpha$  on sub-domains of self-differentiation index was .56-.82 in this study (overall .87).

Data were analyzed using SPSS Statistics 22. T-test and ANOVA were used to confirm the level of stress by the adjustment level to the college life, differences of self-differentiation, and adjustment level to the college life by the levels of stress and self-differentiation. With respect to the mediated effect of self-differentiation in the relationships with the stress and adjustment, Sobel test was performed to find out the statistical significance on the mediated effect after performing regression analysis according to the analysis process of mediated effect suggested by Baron & Kenny<sup>[15]</sup> (1st step, effects of independent variables to mediated variables; 2nd step,

effects of independent variables to dependent variables; and 3rd step, effects of independent variables with mediated variables to dependent variables).

## Result

- 1. Adjustment to the college life by levels of stress and self-differentiation:** The group with lower level of the stress and higher level of self-differentiation showed higher level of adjustment to the college life and the group with higher level of the stress and lower level of self-differentiation did lower level of adjustment, demonstrating statistically significant differences [Table 1].

**Table 1. Adjustment by level of stress and self-differentiation**

Stress	Self-differentiation	n	Adjustment	F
Low	Low	179	3.14±0.40	62.47*
	High	372	3.40±0.45	
High	Low	377	2.99±0.38	
	High	176	3.15±0.40	

\*: p<0.01

- 2. Mediated effect of self-differentiation:** [Table 2] shows the results whether self-differentiation was mediated to the relationship between the stress of college students and their adjustment level to the college life.

**Table 2. Mediation effect of self-differentiation**

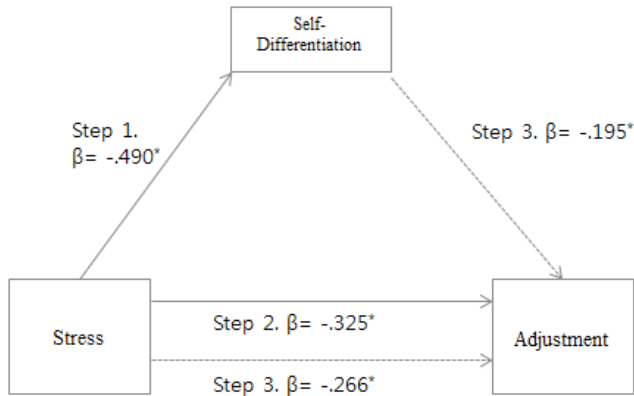
Step	Predictors	Variable	B	SE	$\beta$	t	Adj.R <sup>2</sup>	F
1	Stress	S-differentiation	-0.46	0.02	-0.49	-18.64*	0.24	347.51*
2	Stress	Adjustment	-0.30	0.03	-0.33	-11.41*	0.11	130.27*
3	Stress	Adjustment	-0.18	0.03	-6.15	-6.15*	0.16	104.55*
	S-differentiation		0.26	0.03	0.27	8.40*		

\*: p<0.01

In the 1<sup>st</sup> step, the stress was shown as the statistically significant predictor for self-differentiation ( $\beta = -.490$ ,  $t = -18.642$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and its explanatory power of regression model was 23.9%. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> step, the stress was shown to predict the adjustment significantly ( $\beta = -.325$ ,  $t = -11.413$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and its explanatory power of regression model was 10.5%. In the 3<sup>rd</sup> step, the stress ( $\beta = -.266$ ,  $t = -6.1473$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and self-differentiation ( $\beta = .266$ ,  $t = 8.403$ ,  $p < .001$ ) were shown to predict the adjustment significantly in the regression model predicting both

simultaneously, and its explanatory power of regression model was 15.8%. That means, self-differentiation predicted the adjustment even in the controlled state on the adjustment with the influences of the stress, demonstrating the stress with negative prediction of adjustment apart from the mediated effect. Therefore, self-differentiation can be considered as the partial mediated variable between the stress and adjustment to the college life. Lastly, upon Sobel test results, the statistically significant mediated effects were found

with 7.648 [Figure 1]. In conclusion, self-differentiation can be considered with partial mediated effect in the relationship between the stress and adjustment.



\*  $p < .001$ , Sobel test  $z=7.648$ ,  $p=.000$

**Figure 1. Mediated effect of Self-differentiation in the relationship between Stress and Adjustment**

### Discussion

First, upon the results of the stress by the adjustment level of college life and the differences of self-differentiation, the group with lower level of adjustment to the college life showed higher levels in overall stress level and its sub-domains and lower levels in overall self-differentiation and its sub-domains. This is consistent with the previous reports that the level of adjustment to the college life was lower as the level of stress was higher<sup>[4]</sup>, and the level of self-differentiation was lower<sup>[16]</sup>. Geun<sup>[17]</sup> reported in his study on the relationship among self-differentiation, symptoms of maladjustment, and problematic behaviors in the adolescents that symptoms of maladjustment were occurred such as psychosomatic symptom, obsession, interpersonal sensitivity, depression, anxiety, hostility, paranoia, phobic anxiety, psychosis, and so on when the level of self-differentiation was low, and the level of self-differentiation could predict the maladjustment symptoms and problematic behaviors, which supports the results of this study.

Second, upon the results of the adjustment level of college life by the level of self-differentiation when the students experienced the same level of the stress, the level of the adjustment of college life was different by the level of self-differentiation even with the same level of the stress. It would be all right for the adjustment to the college life if the levels of stress and self-differentiation were low, however, in case of the high level of stress,

the level of the adjustment to the college life was enhanced by lowering the level of stress if the level of self-differentiation was high while the adjustment level was lowered without controlling the stress if the level of self-differentiation was low.

Third, the stress and self-differentiation of the college students were significant predictors with 15.8% of explanatory power on the adjustment to the college life. As the level of the stress was lower and the level of self-differentiation was higher, the level of the adjustment to the college life was higher, and self-differentiation showed the partial mediated effect in the relationship between the stress and the adjustment to the college life. As the level of self-differentiation was higher, the experiences of living stress were lower without considering the stress seriously<sup>[18]</sup>. Self-differentiation may play a role to enhance the level of the adjustment to the college life by controlling stress in a way to maintain harmonious interpersonal relationship upon proper responses to the stressful situations by active reactions such as problem-centric ones or pursuing social support<sup>[19]</sup>, and upon expressing their feelings in the proper time and places with well socialized adjustment way.

Being the college students from the high school ones, they develop a variety of relationships and experience multiple problems such as competitions for job seeking, financial problems like tuition fee, pocket money and so on, and the stress from the anxiety on the future. From the results of this study, it is considered that enhancing self-differentiation is important since those with high level of self-differentiation perceive the stress low and cope with it properly to enhance the level of the adjustment to the college life. In the previous studies, the level of self-differentiation was determined by the results of family interactions<sup>[20]</sup>, the positive correlation was found in the communication between parents and children<sup>[18]</sup> and the level of self-differentiation was higher as the communication was more open<sup>[21]</sup>.

### Conclusion

From the results of this study, it is considered that enhancing self-differentiation is important since those with high level of self-differentiation perceive the stress low and cope with the stress properly to enhance the level of the adjustment to the college life. Hence, it is necessary to prepare multiple programs that can enhance the interaction between children and parents and acquire

the open communication skill. In addition, there were many studies on the effects of self-differentiation as the independent variable to the dependent variables, however, few studies on the effects of self-differentiation as the dependent variable, which requires further studies. This study had the meaning to find out the mediated effect of self-differentiation in the relationship between the stress and the adjustment to the college life although it has the limitation to generalize the results since the random sampling was performed among the college students in a region in Korea. Further studies are anticipated to be able to review the effective supports on the adjustment to the college life by understanding in multidimensional aspects upon development of structural equation model to verify the causality among major variables that can explain the adjustment to the college life.

**Ethical Clearance:** Not required

**Source of Funding:** Self

**Conflict of Interest:** Nil

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