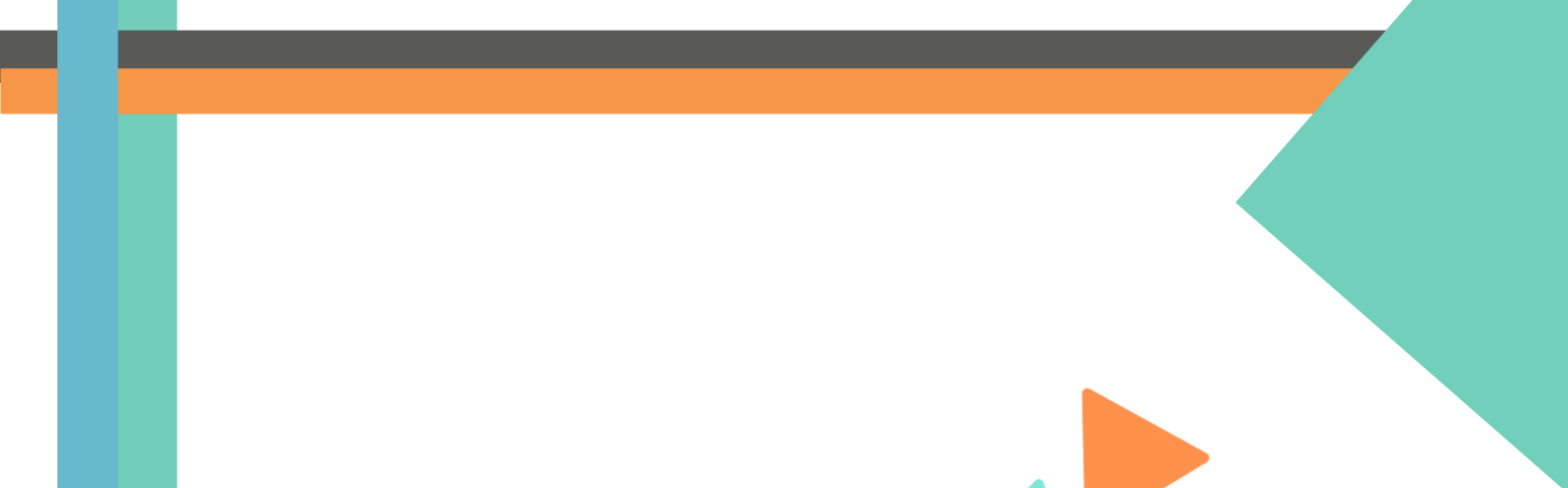




ICEM

International Conference on
Entrepreneurial Motivation

Bold steps: Entrepreneurship in times of change

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CULTURAL PATTERNS OF EMOTIONAL REGULATION IN FAMILY BUSINESS SYSTEMS: INSIGHTS FROM MEDITERRANEAN AND CONFUCIAN CONTEXTS

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Abstract

Family businesses are emotionally dense organizations in which professional roles and family ties are deeply intertwined. Unlike non-family firms, where organizational and emotional domains may be more clearly separated, family enterprises are embedded in generational bonds, collective identity, and shared history (Bowen, 1978; Kerr & Bowen, 1988). These features make them particularly sensitive to periods of pressure such as succession, intergenerational transition, or structural crisis. In such contexts, emotional intensity may escalate, with significant consequences for both organizational resilience and relational stability. The present study investigates how emotional regulation operates in family business systems under pressure and tension, emphasizing the cultural variations that shape these processes. Building on Bowen's theory of differentiation of self, the analysis explores the ability of individuals to remain emotionally autonomous while maintaining relational connections (Bowen, 1978). By comparing Mediterranean (Italy) and Confucian (South Korea) contexts, the study examines how cultural norms surrounding closeness, hierarchy, and emotional expression influence emotional regulation in family enterprises.

The central research questions are:

RQ1: How do cultural expectations regarding emotional expression and relational closeness shape regulation strategies in family businesses?

RQ2: What role does differentiation of self play in mediating emotional tension during transitions?

RQ3: How do Mediterranean and Confucian families differ in their use of emotional fusion and emotional cutoff as adaptive strategies?

The study draws on Bowen's family systems theory (Bowen, 1978), which conceptualizes the family as an emotional unit governed by interdependence, anxiety regulation, and transgenerational transmission. The core construct, *differentiation of self*, describes the individual's ability to maintain clarity of thought and emotional balance while staying connected to the family system. High differentiation allows members to regulate emotions effectively, while low differentiation leads to dysfunctional responses such as emotional fusion (over-involvement and blurred boundaries) or emotional cutoff (withdrawal and detachment) (Kerr & Bowen, 1988; Knerr & Bartle-Haring, 2010). However, emotional regulation cannot be understood outside cultural contexts. Cross-cultural psychology shows that emotional scripts differ substantially between societies (Hofstede, 1980; Laungani, 2007; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). What is considered adaptive in one culture may appear dysfunctional in another. Thus, family business dynamics must be analyzed not only through systemic theory but also through culturally grounded perspectives.

This contribution adopts a comparative and conceptual approach, combining insights from family systems theory, cross-cultural psychology, and family business studies. The analysis is based on three steps:

- (a) Conceptual framing, using differentiation of self as the lens to interpret emotional regulation.
- (b) Cultural contextualization, analyzing the Mediterranean (Italian) and Confucian (South Korean) traditions regarding norms of emotional expression, authority, and relational ethics.
- (c) Application to family business transitions, examining how emotional regulation functions during high-stakes moments such as succession, generational shifts, and crises. This approach does not seek universal generalizations but rather offers culturally grounded theorization of family business dynamics under pressure.

Results and Findings may be syntetised as follows:

Emotional Regulation as a Systemic Resource

Emotional regulation functions as a systemic resource that enables families to manage anxiety and conflict. Families with high differentiation sustain constructive dialogue, regulate anxiety, and preserve both autonomy and cohesion. Conversely, low differentiation leads either to fusion, where individuality is lost, or to cutoff, where emotional ties are weakened (Bowen, 1978; Knerr & Bartle-Haring, 2010).

Mediterranean Context (Italy)

Italian family businesses are situated in a cultural environment that values expressiveness, physical closeness, and emotional intensity (Bonino et al., 2005; Lampis, 2016). Emotional fusion is often interpreted as solidarity rather than dysfunction (Manzi et al., 2006). However, during transitions such as succession, excessive closeness may generate role confusion, heightened conflict, and polarization across generations (Lampis et al., 2020). Differentiation of self in this context helps set boundaries, reduce volatility, and

support constructive negotiation.

Confucian Context (South Korea)

South Korean family businesses operate in a relational system structured around hierarchy, harmony, and emotional restraint (Kim et al., 2014). Here, emotional cutoff often serves as an adaptive response to avoid overt conflict and preserve group cohesion (Chung & Gale, 2006). While this strategy reduces visible disputes, it risks generating hidden resentments and limiting authentic intergenerational dialogue (Woo & Kowalski, 2020). Differentiation of self supports individuals in navigating hierarchical expectations while maintaining internal clarity and expressing aspirations responsibly (Kim et al., 2021). Transitions such as succession or generational entry amplify emotional tension (Jankowski et al., 2013; Skowron et al., 2009). In Italy, these transitions are marked by visible dialogues, expressive conflicts, and generational coalitions. In South Korea, they are mediated through ritualized expectations, silent deference, and indirect signals. Both cultural settings reveal that differentiation of self is crucial but operates differently: in Italy, it moderates emotional expressiveness; in South Korea, it legitimizes voice while preserving harmony.

The findings underscore three insights:

Cultural mediation of emotional constructs. Fusion and cutoff cannot be uniformly interpreted. In Mediterranean cultures, fusion embodies care; in Confucian cultures, cutoff sustains harmony.

Differentiation as a developmental capacity. In both contexts, differentiation strengthens resilience but must be adapted to cultural expectations.

Emotional regulation in family businesses is a systemic and culturally embedded process. By comparing Mediterranean and Confucian contexts, this study demonstrates that differentiation of self is not a universal skill but a culturally situated practice. In Italy, it mitigates volatility and supports dialogue; in South Korea, it provides clarity and legitimizes intergenerational negotiation within hierarchical systems. Understanding cultural variations in emotional regulation offers pathways to strengthen resilience, reduce intra-family conflict, and ensure sustainable governance during uncertain and high-pressure transitions. Therefore, the research has two main implications: theoretically, this study extends Bowen's model beyond clinical contexts, integrating cultural psychology into family business research. It questions the universality of Western-centric emotional norms and highlights the contextual meanings of regulation strategies (Ford, 2010; Hofstede et al., 2010). Practically, it provides culturally attuned tools for practitioners. For Mediterranean families, interventions may focus on boundary-setting and conflict moderation. For Confucian families, emphasis may be on encouraging emotional voice and balancing authority with recognition. In both cases, differentiation of self enhances resilience and improves the chances of successful intergenerational transitions. Thus, family business consultants and educators must adopt culturally sensitive approaches: fostering boundaries and emotional moderation in Mediterranean families and legitimizing emotional expression and trust-building in Confucian families.

Keywords: Cross-Cultural Comparison; Differentiation of Self; Emotional Regulation; Family Business Systems; Mediterranean and Confucian Contexts.

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