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Rethinking leadership-relevant functioning through Bowen's theory: emotional regulation and cultural adaptation in Italy and South Korea

Abstract

This study examines whether differentiation of self (DS), derived from Bowen's family systems theory, is associated with leadership-relevant psychological functioning under relational pressure, and whether these associations vary across cultural contexts. Adopting a cross-cultural psychosocial perspective, the paper questions universalist assumptions in leadership research that treat emotionally autonomous self-regulation as uniformly adaptive across settings. A cross-sectional comparative survey design was used to analyse data collected in Italy and South Korea through the Differentiation of Self Inventory-Revised (DSI-R) and the Outcome Questionnaire-45.2 (OQ-45.2). The analytical strategy combined descriptive comparisons, correlational analyses, and regression models to examine both the overall association between DS and psychological distress and the extent to which cultural context shapes these relationships. The findings indicate that DS is meaningfully associated with psychological distress in both groups, while some dimensions appear to vary across contexts in their relative salience.

These results support a culturally embedded view of leadership-relevant functioning and suggest that the psychosocial processes linking self-regulation, relational boundaries, and distress may not operate uniformly across cultures. The study is limited by its cross-sectional design and by using self-report measures, particularly in relation to the Korean adaptation of the DSI-R. Overall, the paper contributes to leadership research by proposing DS as a culturally sensitive mechanism for understanding functioning under relational and emotional demands.

Keywords: *Bowen theory, Confucian collectivist culture, cross-cultural leadership, differentiation of self, Mediterranean culture, leadership-relevant functioning.*

1. Introduction

Leadership is not culturally neutral. Even when organisations adopt "universal" leadership models, what counts as effective leadership is enacted through culturally embedded norms about autonomy, hierarchy, emotional expression, and relational obligation. However, intercultural leadership research has typically explained cultural variation through values, prototypes, and behavioural expectations, paying less attention to the relational self-processes through which leaders manage everyday interactional demands. As a result, we still lack a mechanism-based account of how culturally embedded leadership expectations translate into leaders' moment-to-moment regulation of emotion, autonomy, and relational closeness, and how these processes, in turn, relate to psychological functioning, enabling or constraining leadership practice.

This paper addresses that gap by bringing Bowen's family systems theory into intercultural leadership research. Bowen's theory (1978) is especially useful because it specifies how individuals manage anxiety, emotional reactivity, and relational pressures while maintaining a coherent sense of self. Its core construct, differentiation of self (DS), captures the capacity to remain connected with others without becoming emotionally fused, and to remain autonomous without resorting to emotional distancing (Bowen, 1978; Ferch & Mitchell, 2001; Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Although DS has been studied primarily in family and clinical contexts, it can be reframed as a micro-foundational capacity for leadership-relevant functioning: it shapes whether leaders stay thoughtful under relational strain, sustain connection during conflict, and preserve integrity while adapting to social expectations (Lee & Johnson, 2017; Knerr & Bartle-Haring, 2010).

Conceptually, DS includes intrapsychic and interpersonal dimensions. Intrapsychically, differentiation reflects the ability to balance emotion and reason, supporting reflective judgement rather than impulsive reactivity. A related component is the ability to maintain an I-position, namely a stable capacity to articulate one's stance while remaining in dialogue with internal and external demands (Hermans, 2001). Interpersonally, differentiation involves sustaining closeness while maintaining boundaries: avoiding fusion (over-involvement that intensifies reactivity) and avoiding emotional cut-off (distancing used to reduce anxiety but often at the cost of trust and coordination) (Bowen, 1978; Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Framed this way, DS is not a "personality add-on", but a relational regulation process that can shape how leaders manage closeness, distance, and anxiety in everyday organising.

This mechanism-based perspective also clarifies a persistent limitation in cross-cultural leadership theory. Large programmes such as GLOBE demonstrate that leadership ideals and perceived effectiveness vary across cultures (House, 2004, p. 5; Javidan et al., 2004), raising the question of whether leadership behaviours are universal or culturally contingent (Javidan et al., 2004; Kordova & Hirschprung, 2025). However, even when contingency is acknowledged, dominant models often retain Western-centric assumptions about autonomy, emotional control, and the "ideal" leader, thereby marginalising relational and emotional logics of leadership (Ford, 2010). By foregrounding DS, we treat emotional and relational regulation as central mechanisms of culturally situated leadership-relevant functioning, rather than peripheral "soft skills". This is particularly important because the same behaviour (e.g., restraint, closeness, deference) can carry different relational meanings across cultures, altering both the demands placed on leaders and the psychological costs of meeting those demands. Positioning DS as a psychosocial mechanism allows us to complement rather than duplicate trait- and cognition-based approaches.

Leadership research links effectiveness to stable personality traits (e.g., agreeableness, conscientiousness, extraversion, openness, neuroticism) and related individual differences (Antonopoulou et al., 2019; Gkintoni et al., 2022; Kandler et al., 2014). Implicit leadership theory (ILT) likewise shows that "leader" is a cognitive category shaped by background factors and learned prototypes (Calder, 1977; Lord et al., 1986; Hunt et al., 1990). While these perspectives explain what attributes or perceptions are associated with leadership, they underspecify how leaders regulate emotion and relationships under culturally patterned pressures. DS helps fill this gap by describing the relational self-process through which individual differences are expressed when leaders must simultaneously maintain autonomy and meet relational obligations. This integration is timely because cross-cultural collaboration is now routine, increasing the likelihood of mismatches in norms around hierarchy, autonomy, and relational harmony, and making self-regulation a key condition of effective organising.

Using Italian and South Korean samples, we test how DS, both overall and across its intrapsychic and interpersonal dimensions, is associated with leadership-relevant psychological functioning under relational pressure, and whether these associations differ across cultural contexts (Hofstede, 1980; House, 2004; Antonopoulou et al., 2019; Calder, 1977; Gkintoni et al., 2022;

Lord et al., 1986). We then assess whether the strength and direction of these associations differ across cultural contexts, thereby testing cultural contingency rather than assuming it.

Guided by this framework, we pose two research questions:

(RQ1) How is differentiation of self, both overall and across its dimensions, related to leadership-relevant psychological functioning under relational pressure?

(RQ2) To what extent does cultural context (Italy vs South Korea) moderate the associations between differentiation of self and leadership-relevant functioning?

By answering these questions, the paper's original contribution makes Bowen's DS construct explicit, empirically testable, and directly useful for intercultural leadership research by theorising DS as a mechanism linking culturally embedded expectations to leadership-relevant functioning. In doing so, it responds to calls to unsettle normative assumptions around autonomy, hierarchy, and leadership effectiveness (Edwards et al., 2024), and it articulates a more focused rationale for why this cross-cultural investigation is particularly warranted in the current organisational context.

2. Conceptual Background

2.1 Leadership as culturally embedded functioning: from cognitive prototypes to self-regulatory micro-processes

Leadership effectiveness is widely recognised as a critical driver of organisational performance. However, evidence from intercultural research suggests that leadership is enacted and evaluated as a culturally embedded organisational practice. Autonomy, hierarchy, closeness, and emotional expression are regulated through locally shared norms rather than universal benchmarks (Hofstede, 1980; House, 2004). Although leadership scholarship has produced robust accounts of what leadership looks like across contexts, less is known about how leaders manage relational and emotional pressures in everyday organising. It is also unclear how these self-processes relate to leadership-relevant psychological functioning.

Cognitive approaches to leadership development clarify how leadership is recognised and judged. Implicit Leadership Theories (ILTs) show that people hold mental prototypes of leadership formed through socialisation and experience, which act as benchmarks for distinguishing leaders from non-leaders and effective from ineffective leadership (Korukonda & Hunt, 1989). Extending this view, Hunt et al. (1990) show that top-management leadership prototypes emerge from interactions

among environmental, organisational, and individual factors. They also argue that leadership effectiveness depends partly on how leader cues align with follower expectations. Recent evidence similarly indicates that leader evaluation is shaped by congruence between leader attributes and implicit expectations (Park et al., 2024). Individual differences also matter for the content of prototypes. Keller (1999) links personality traits to dimensions such as sensitivity, dedication, and charisma. The study also suggests that early socialisation influences idealised leadership, as parental trait perceptions help shape leadership prototypes.

However, prototype-based accounts primarily explain cognitive categorisation and evaluative alignment. They do not fully specify the psychosocial mechanisms through which leaders regulate anxiety, emotional reactivity, autonomy, and relational pressure in unfolding situations. This is where leadership research intersects with self-regulation perspectives. Shondrick et al. (2010) connect ILTs with cognitive science and argue for context-sensitive assessment and training. Their work suggests that leadership development depends on how individuals process cues, regulate attention and emotion, and update behavioural responses in dynamic environments. Complementing this perspective, research on emotional intelligence frames leadership success in terms of emotion-related capacities (Antonakis et al., 2009; Rajah et al., 2011). Nevertheless, these extensions often retain an individual-centred logic. As a result, they risk treating "effective self-regulation" as universally desirable and functionally equivalent across cultural systems.

Uncertainty represents a particularly consequential boundary condition. It amplifies relational pressure and increases the costs of misaligned emotion regulation. In uncertain contexts, leader behaviours become more salient signals, and culturally patterned meanings of "support" or "control" can shape follower responses. For example, Wang et al. (2022) show that supportive leadership can promote innovation under uncertainty in China's e-commerce sector, partly through perceived career sustainability. This suggests that relationally supportive leadership can buffer uncertainty. However, "support" is culturally interpreted and may not operate identically across contexts. Building on the ILT tradition, which clarifies how leadership is cognitively recognised, and on self-regulation perspectives, which highlight regulation under pressure, this study focuses on relational self-processes. Specifically, it examines how leaders manage autonomy, closeness, and emotional reactivity under relational pressure. It also explores how these processes relate to leadership-relevant psychological functioning. We therefore ask: *(RQ1) How is differentiation of*

self, both overall and across its dimensions, related to leadership-relevant psychological functioning under relational pressure? And *(RQ2) To what extent does cultural context (Italy vs South Korea) moderate the associations between differentiation of self and leadership-relevant functioning?*

2.2 Why culture matters: limits of Western-centric leadership assumptions

A longstanding critique in leadership research concerns the dominance of Western-centric models. These models were largely developed in the United States and are often treated as broadly generalisable (Peterson & Hunt, 1997). Calls for revising leadership theories stress that many constructs embed cultural assumptions about autonomy, authority, and "effective" emotional conduct (Ford, 2010). Cultural dimensions such as power distance and individualism-collectivism shape both what followers expect from leaders and how leader behaviours are interpreted (Hofstede, 1980; House, 2004).

Critiques of competency-based leadership discourse reinforce this point. Bolden and Gosling (2006) argue that the pervasive focus on competencies can become a "language game" that narrows the conceptual space. In this view, leadership risks being reduced to a technocratic checklist (Pondy, 1978), rather than understood as a socially embedded practice. This critique motivates our approach. We treat relational self-processes as micro-foundations of leadership-relevant functioning rather than as context-free traits. We also explicitly challenge psychological universalism by arguing that the meaning and adaptiveness of self-regulatory patterns depend on cultural norms.

Cross-cultural evidence illustrates why measurement and inference must be culturally attentive. Constructs such as transformational leadership and leader-member exchange can yield different outcomes depending on cultural norms. In addition, some behaviours are tolerated or interpreted differently across contexts. For instance, abusive supervision is tolerated differently in South Korea than in the United States. This pattern is often explained by higher power distance and more hierarchical workplace norms (Atwater et al., 2021). Such findings underscore the importance of validating leadership measures across contexts and specifying whether constructs are universal or culture-bound (Javidan et al., 2004).

The GLOBE project, which spans 62 countries, provides influential evidence that leadership preferences vary systematically across cultural clusters (House, 2004; Javidan et al., 2004). For

example, in Confucian Asia, self-protective leadership is relatively favoured and characterised by status-consciousness, procedural decision-making, conflict avoidance, and face-saving strategies (Javidan et al., 2004). In contrast, in Nordic Europe, self-protective leadership is least desirable. Participative leadership is highly valued, consistent with low power distance and egalitarian norms (Northouse, 2025). The Anglo cluster also shows stronger preferences for participative and charismatic leadership compared with Confucian Asia, where participative leadership is less valued (Atwater et al., 2021).

Hence, if leadership is culturally embedded, then emotionally "autonomous" self-regulation cannot be assumed to be uniformly adaptive. Because cultures differ in how they define authority, harmony, autonomy, and appropriate emotional expression, the same DS-related mechanism may lead to different leadership-relevant outcomes in Italy and South Korea. This logic directly grounds our moderation expectations, later formalised in our hypothesis H2.

2.3 Differentiation of self: a system-level mechanism for leadership-relevant functioning

Traditional leadership theories often conceptualise effectiveness in terms of stable traits, observable behaviours, and competencies. These approaches are typically grounded in positivist and individualistic paradigms (Ford, 2010). While valuable, these approaches may under-theorise the relational systems in which leaders operate and the anxiety-regulation dynamics that shape behaviour under pressure. Tourish's (2015) critique of "gap-spotting" research cautions that incremental studies can become repetitive. This occurs when they do not challenge underlying assumptions or generate mechanism-based, testable propositions. In this spirit, we propose DS as a psychosocial mechanism to strengthen theory building in cross-cultural leadership. Specifically, it helps explain how relational pressure and emotional reactivity are regulated in culturally patterned ways.

Bowen's family systems theory conceptualises DS as the capacity to balance emotional reactivity and relational connection with a clear sense of self (Bowen, 1978; Kerr & Bowen, 1988). From an intrapsychic perspective, DS supports the capacity to regulate affect and sustain clarity under stress. From an interpersonal perspective, DS reflects the ability to remain connected without becoming either emotionally fused or emotionally cut off. These system-level dynamics are directly relevant to leadership-relevant functioning. Leadership roles typically intensify relational demands, increase exposure to conflict, and require decisions under emotionally consequential conditions.

This connection becomes more tangible when DS is translated into concrete organisational situations. For example, under the pressure of cross-cultural negotiations, high emotional reactivity may manifest as defensive escalation or impaired reflective judgement. It may also lead to abrupt shifts from dialogue to self-protection when norms related to hierarchy, status, or face are perceived as threatened. In situations of team conflict, emotional cut-off may appear as delayed responses, avoidance of repair-oriented conversations, or premature withdrawal from coordination. It may also take the form of a formally appropriate yet emotionally absent interaction style, which maintains surface order while gradually undermining trust. By contrast, a stronger I-position may enable leaders to communicate a principled stance while remaining engaged, without collapsing into either reactivity or disengagement. DS can therefore be theorised as a leadership-relevant self-regulatory mechanism. It offers a mechanism-centred lens that complements cognitive leadership accounts by focusing not on prototypes, but on the self-processes through which leaders remain functional under relational strain. This mechanism-centred logic also aligns with recent evidence that leadership influence operates through salient social cues embedded in context. For example, Masood et al. (2024) show that leaders' unethical pro-organisational behaviour shapes follower knowledge behaviours, such as knowledge hiding and knowledge sharing. These effects operate through social learning processes and moral self-efficacy, highlighting how leaders conduct functions as a normative cue. Because the meaning and acceptability of such cues vary by context, a cross-cultural DS lens is appropriate for theorising how relational regulation interacts with culturally shaped norms. Similarly, evidence on leadership as a capability-building process reinforces context-embedded effects. Malodia et al. (2023) show that, in Indian SMEs, digital transformation pathways depend on leadership and self-efficacy. These processes are shaped by institutional and cultural settings, implying that leadership capabilities do not translate into uniform outcomes across contexts. Italy and South Korea offer a particularly informative contrast. Their distinct cultural norms around hierarchy, relational closeness, and emotional expression help illuminate how DS operates differently across contexts. Italy can be characterised as a hybrid Southern European context. It combines collectivist relational warmth with individualistic emphases on self-expression and autonomy (Hofstede, 1980; Hofstede et al., 2010; Lampis et al., 2020; Rodríguez-González et al., 2020). South Korea, by contrast, is strongly shaped by Confucian traditions emphasising hierarchy, harmony, and collective cohesion (Hofstede et al., 2010; Moleiro

et al., 2017; Sorokowska et al., 2017). These contrasts matter because DS sub-processes (e.g., emotional cut-off, fusion, I-position) may carry different meanings and "functional payoffs" across cultural contexts. In this respect, the notion of the "self-in-relation" is particularly helpful for interpreting DS in collectivist settings. In a Confucian context, higher differentiation should not be equated with an individualistic ideal of standing apart from others. Rather, mature interdependence refers to the capacity to preserve a reflective sense of self while remaining responsively embedded in significant relationships and role obligations. Accordingly, a culturally congruent I-position in South Korea may appear less as overt assertion and more as a calm, face-sensitive clarity that preserves relational harmony without surrendering agency. By contrast, enmeshment does not refer to interdependence as such, but to anxiety-driven over-accommodation, blurred interpersonal boundaries, and difficulty maintaining a coherent position under relational pressure. Distinguishing mature interdependence from fusion is therefore essential if DS is to be interpreted in collectivist contexts without imposing a Western ideal of autonomy.

This distinction helps explain why the adaptive value of specific DS dimensions varies across cultural systems.

In a high-power distance system, relational interdependence may be normative and stabilising, while in a more openly expressive system, self-definition and directness may more strongly buffer distress. Complementary leadership research supports this contingency logic. Perano et al. (2019) show that both vertical and shared leadership can predict team effectiveness in healthcare teams, with shared leadership showing consistent value. Singh et al. (2019) further show that leadership configurations interact with organisational culture (e.g., market orientation) to influence performance via innovation capability. These findings reinforce the view that effectiveness depends on "fit" between relational regulation and contextual norms, strengthening the rationale for modelling cultural moderation rather than presuming universal effects.

To align theory and analyses, we define leadership-relevant outcomes as psychological functioning under relational pressure. This is operationalised through psychological distress and its associations with differentiation processes, rather than through direct behavioural ratings of leadership effectiveness. This keeps the theoretical background closely tied to our quantitative design. It also positions DS as a mechanism for predicting functional capacity under relational pressure.

Table 1. Situates DS within a broader leadership nomological network by clarifying points of overlap with adjacent constructs while highlighting DS as a mechanism-based account of functioning under relational pressure.

DS (DSI-R) subscale	Functional definition (mechanism)	Adjacent leadership construct	Conceptual overlap	Key difference: what DS adds
Emotional Reactivity (ER)	Speed and intensity of affective arousal under relational pressure	Emotional intelligence (EI) (Antonakis et al., 2009; Rajah et al., 2011)	Both involve emotion regulation and self-control	EI typically frames regulation as an individual capability, DS frames ER as a system-embedded response to relational anxiety, enabling clearer predictions about when reactivity escalates across cultural norms.
I-Position (IP)	Capacity to maintain a clear, principled self-definition while staying connected	Leader authenticity	Both relate to self-clarity and value-consistency	Authenticity is often treated as a moral or behavioural display. DS specifies the relational mechanism of maintaining the "I" without over-accommodation or withdrawal, under pressure.
Emotional Cut-off (EC)	Emotionally distancing or disengaging to reduce anxiety and conflict	Authentic leadership (boundary management), leader detachment	Distancing can be interpreted as composure or coldness	DS distinguishes anxiety-driven cut-off from strategic distance, and supports tests of when cut-off is maladaptive versus contextually functional
Fusion with Others (FO)	Over-involvement and reliance on approval, porous self-boundaries	Paternalistic leadership; high-dependence leader–follower ties (House, 2004; Javidan et al., 2004)	Both implicate interdependence and strong relational expectations	DS separates culturally normative interdependence from anxiety-driven fusion, allowing culturally contingent predictions about FO-distress links (Atwater et al., 2021)
Overall Differentiation	Ability to remain emotionally connected without losing self-definition	Participative vs paternalistic leadership; cultural fit of leadership (Northouse,	Both depend on norms around autonomy, participation, and authority	DS shifts the unit of explanation from leadership "forms" to functioning mechanisms under relational pressure, linking culture to

of the Self (DS)	or becoming reactive	2025; House, 2004)		leadership-relevant functioning rather than ratings of effectiveness

2.4 Hypothesis development

DS and leadership-relevant psychological functioning

Because DS captures anxiety-driven regulation under relational pressure, lower DS should be reflected in patterns of heightened reactivity, distancing, or over-involvement. These patterns are expected to co-occur with poorer psychological functioning. Empirical work on DS consistently links differentiation to well-being and lower distress (Jankowski et al., 2013; Knerr & Bartle-Haring, 2010; Skowron et al., 2009; Tuason & Friedlander, 2000), and evidence from Southern Europe suggests that closeness and interdependence may not carry the same maladaptive meaning observed in more individualistic settings (Lampis et al., 2017; Lampis et al., 2020; Rodríguez-González et al., 2019; Sommantico et al., 2021). This supports an overall association while also motivating cultural moderation.

For these reasons, we advance the following hypothesis:

> ***H1***. *Across the overall sample, higher differentiation of self (DS) will be associated with more adaptive leadership-relevant psychological functioning, operationalised as lower psychological distress.*

DS and its dimensions may relate to psychological distress in distinct ways (Bowen, 1978; Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Specifically, heightened emotional reactivity, emotional cut-off, and fusion with others are expected to be associated with poorer psychological functioning. In contrast, a stronger I-position should be associated with lower distress. Examining these subscale-level patterns helps clarify which differentiation processes are most relevant to leadership-relevant psychological functioning under relational pressure.

For this reason, we advance the following hypothesis:

> ***H1a***. *At the subscale level, greater emotional reactivity, emotional cut-off, and fusion with others (i.e., lower ER/EC/FO scores) are expected to be associated with higher psychological distress. In contrast, a stronger I-position is expected to be associated with lower psychological distress.*

Cultural contingency of DS pathways

Cross-cultural leadership evidence indicates that behavioural cues, relational norms, and expectations about hierarchy and emotional conduct differ systematically across cultural clusters (House, 2004; Javidan et al., 2004; Atwater et al., 2021). Therefore, DS subscales may not have uniform implications across Italy and South Korea. In particular, in a harmony-oriented and higher power distance context, relational interdependence may be more normative and psychologically protective. This may weaken the link between fusion or cut-off and distress. In a more openly expressive context, self-definition (I-position) may more strongly buffer distress.

The magnitude, and in some cases the direction, of the associations specified in H1 and H1a are expected to differ between Italy and South Korea. Accordingly, we propose the following hypothesis:

> ***H2.*** *In South Korea, where higher power distance and harmony-oriented norms make relational interdependence more normative, the associations between of fusion with others and emotional cut-off with psychological distress are expected to be weaker than in Italy. In Italy, where power distance is comparatively lower and emotional expression is more openly endorsed, I-position is expected to show a stronger negative association with psychological distress.*

3. Methodology

3.1. Overview of the research design and process

This study adopts a cross-sectional, multi-group comparative survey design. The research process followed a step-by-step workflow to ensure transparency and reproducibility:

(a) definition of the research focus and interpretive boundaries (DS and psychological distress, with leadership framed only as a theoretical implication), (b) selection of instruments (DSI-R; OQ-45.2), (c) cross-cultural adaptation of the Korean DSI-R (forward translation, back-translation, committee reconciliation, and cognitive debriefing), (d) non-probabilistic recruitment and data collection in each country (Italy 2022; South Korea 2023), (e) data cleaning and preparation (exclusions, scoring, reverse-coded items), (f) psychometric checks and measurement comparability testing (reliability, factor structure, and measurement invariance where feasible), (g) descriptive and inferential analyses (correlations, ANOVA, hierarchical regression and cross-country comparative modelling), (h) sensitivity analyses for demographic imbalance and sampling

limitations, and (i) interpretation of findings within the limits imposed by measurement and design constraints.

3.2. Research design, context, and study focus

This study investigates whether and how cultural context moderates the association between DS and psychological distress, as a set of leadership-relevant relational and emotional self-processes in two distinct sociocultural settings: Italy, a Mediterranean society that blends collectivist and individualistic values, and South Korea, a Confucian-influenced collectivist culture. Importantly, the present study does not include direct measures of leadership behaviours, leadership effectiveness, or objective/subjective leadership outcomes. Therefore, the empirical focus is restricted to DS and psychological distress, and the manuscript frames "leadership" only as a theoretical domain to which these self-processes may be relevant (e.g., emotion regulation, relational functioning, decision-related stress), rather than as an outcome assessed by the instruments used. Consistent with the measures available in the present dataset, the empirical analyses focus on psychological distress and its associations with DS. Accordingly, any references to "leadership effectiveness" are treated as theoretically informed implications (e.g., emotional regulation and interpersonal functioning), rather than as directly observed leadership outcomes. This interpretive boundary is maintained throughout the Methods, Results, and Discussion to avoid methodologically unsupported claims (Shadish et al., 2002).

3.3. Ethics and procedure

The study was conducted in line with the Declaration of Helsinki. In line with institutional policies, the protocol was reviewed and deemed minimal risk because it relied on anonymous self-report questionnaires and included only adult respondents (18+); therefore, no formal IRB approval was required. A translated version of the questionnaire used in this research, in the Korean language, the Differentiation of Self Inventory-Revised (DSI-R) and the Outcome Questionnaire-45.2 (OQ-45.2), may be provided by the corresponding author upon request. The administration of the questionnaires took approximately 20 minutes per participant in both countries. All participants provided informed consent before participating, confirming their voluntary involvement and awareness that their data would be used solely for research purposes.

3.4. Sample and recruitment

Participants were required to be native citizens of either Italy or South Korea and at least 18 years old to be included in the study (see Table 2). Initial data collection yielded responses from 414 individuals, but 10 were excluded due to incomplete sociodemographic data. The final sample consisted of 404 participants aged 18–62 years, with 235 females (58.16%) and 169 males (41.84%).

Recruitment was conducted using a non-probabilistic sampling method in Italy in 2022 and in South Korea in 2023. In more detail, data was collected through questionnaires. For the Korean sample, participant recruitment took place in Seoul between 12th November 2023 and 10th December 2023. For the Italian sample, recruitment was conducted between 1st March 2022 and 31st May 2022. Because data were collected across different years and the demographic profiles of the national samples differed (e.g., gender composition), cross-national comparisons are interpreted with caution and supplemented by sensitivity analyses (see the Data analysis section). Moreover, as the participants were drawn from the general adult population rather than from organisational leaders or employees assessed in work settings, the study does not claim to compare "leadership effectiveness" across countries. Instead, it examines cross-cultural patterns in the DS and psychological distress. It discusses their potential leadership-relevant implications at a theoretical level, specifically as psychosocial correlations that may shape leaders' functioning under relational and emotional demands.

Table 2. Sociodemographic characteristics of the study sample (N = 404)

Interviewed	**Italy (n= 200)**	**South Korea (n= 204)**
Gender		
Male	65 (32.5%)	104 (50,98%)
Female	135 (67.5%)	100 (49,02%)
Marital status		
Single	50 (25%)	176(86.27%)
Engaged without cohabitation	82 (41%)	3 (1.47%)
Engaged with cohabitation	34 (17%)	5 (2.46%)
Married	34 (17%)	20 (9.8%)

Education level		
Secondary school	98 (49%)	62 (30,39%)
University degree	95 (47.5%)	112 (54,91%)
Postgraduate degree	7 (3.5%)	23 (11.27%)
Missing	-	7 (3.43%)

3.5.Measures

Differentiation of Self Inventory-Revised (DSI-R)

The DSI-R (Skowron & Friedlander, 1998; Skowron & Schmitt, 2003) is a 46-item self-report measure designed to assess four core dimensions of DS, which are:

- Emotional Reactivity (ER) (11 items, e.g., "*At times, my feelings get the best of me, and I have trouble thinking clearly*.")
- I-Position (IP) (11 items, e.g., "*I usually do not change my behaviour simply to please another person*.")
- Emotional Cut-off (EC) (12 items, e.g., "*When one of my relationships becomes very intense, I feel the urge to run away from it*.")
- Fusion with Others (FO) (12 items, e.g., "*I try to live up to my parents' expectations*.")

Responses were recorded on a six-point Likert scale (1 = not at all true of me to 6 = very true of me). Higher scores indicate lower levels of ER, EC, and FO, as well as a greater ability to maintain an independent IP in relationships. Subscale scores were computed using a standardised approach that involved reverse-scoring specific items.

The internal consistency of the DSI-R, as measured by Cronbach's alpha, ranged from .81 to .89 in previous studies (Skowron & Schmitt, 2003).

For the Italian version, the DSI-R was translated and validated in Italian (Lampis et al., 2017), showing good reliability (α = .72 to .85) across subscales; while for the Korean version, a fully culturally validated and normed adaptation is not currently available; therefore, cross-national mean comparisons may be vulnerable to measurement non-equivalence. To mitigate this limitation, we implemented a structured translation procedure and explicitly evaluated measurement properties in the Korean data (see Data analysis). Specifically, the English DSI-R was translated

into Korean via a multi-step process (forward translation, expert review by three native South Korean speakers, reconciliation of discrepancies, and final proofreading).

To strengthen cross-cultural comparability, the revised protocol explicitly included back-translation and committee reconciliation procedures, consistent with cross-cultural instrument adaptation guidelines (Beaton et al., 2000; International Test Commission, 2017). In addition, we conducted a brief pilot comprehension check (cognitive debriefing) with Korean native speakers to identify ambiguous wording and culturally incongruent expressions before finalising the questionnaire.

Given the absence of a formal Korean validation study, findings involving Korean DSI-R scores are interpreted as exploratory and prioritise within-country associations over strong claims about between-country differences (Cho & Chung, 2002; Chung & Gale, 2006; Kim et al., 2015). Moreover, we treat the EC subscale with caution, because its internal consistency in the Korean sample is comparatively lower (α = .68). While values around .70 are often considered a minimal threshold in early-stage research, lower reliability can attenuate associations and inflate measurement error (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). Therefore, results involving EC should be interepreted as exploratory, and we explicitly account for measurement error attenuation when comparing effect sizes across countries (see Data analysis). In our study, internal consistency reliability (Cronbach's alpha) was (see Table 2.1):

Table 2.1 Internal consistency of the DSI-R

Internal consistency of the DSI-R	Italian Sample	Korean Sample
ER	α = .85	α = .81
EC	α = .82	α = .68
IP	α = .76	α = .71
FO	α = .77	α = .74

Outcome Questionnaire-45.2 (OQ-45.2)

The second instrument, the OQ-45.2 (Lambert et al., 1996) is a widely used measure of psychological distress comprising 45 items, assessing well-being across three dimensions:

- Symptom Distress (SD) (22 items, e.g., "*I feel no interest in things.")*

- Interpersonal Relations (IR) (11 items, e.g., "*I feel stressed at work/school*.")
- Social Role (SR) (9 items, e.g., "*I work/study too much*.")

Responses were rated on a five-point Likert scale (0 = never to 4 = always), with higher scores indicating greater psychological distress. The total OQ-45.2 score (0–135) was used in analyses, representing overall psychological well-being.

The OQ-45.2 has been translated into Italian (Lambert & Ogles, 2004; Lo Coco et al., 2006) and Korean (Kim et al., 2015; Kim & Chung, 2006) and has been used in cross-cultural research. Accordingly, in this study, we treat the OQ-45.2 as an indicator of overall psychological distress and interpret cross-country comparisons cautiously, prioritising patterns of associations and robustness checks over strong claims based solely on mean differences (see Table 2.2):

Table 2.2 Internal consistency of the OQ-45.2

	Italian Sample	Korean Sample
Internal consistency of the OQ-45.2	α = .93	α = .94

3.6. Data analysis

All data were analysed using SPSS version 20. Statistical analyses included reliability assessments, descriptive statistics, and inferential tests to examine relationships between DS and psychological distress across the two cultural contexts. Internal consistency was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha. To enable replication, the analytic process followed a pre-specified sequence: (a) data screening (range checks, identification of missingness patterns, and plausibility checks for demographic variables), (b) computation of scale scores including reverse-coded items, (c) reliability estimation for each subscale within each country, (d) descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations stratified by country, (e) group comparisons (ANOVA) with effect sizes, and (f) hierarchical regression models predicting psychological distress. Regression diagnostics included checks for multicollinearity, influential observations (standardised residuals and Cook's distance), and heteroscedasticity; where assumptions were potentially violated, we reported robustness checks using alternative specifications (Lu & White, 2014). Because cross-national comparisons rely on measurement equivalence and a culturally validated Korean DSI-R is unavailable, we implemented additional checks to reduce interpretive ambiguity. First, we examined the factor

structure and internal consistency of DSI-R subscales within each country. Second, where feasible, we assessed cross-group measurement comparability using multi-group confirmatory procedures (configural and metric-level checks), treating any evidence of non-equivalence as a constraint on interpreting mean differences. In the presence of partial or weak invariance, we prioritised within-country associations and separate country-specific models over direct mean comparisons and formal interaction testing. Given the study's comparative aim, the use of self-report measures, and the absence of full cross-cultural measurement invariance of the DSI-R, this strategy offered a more interpretable and methodologically cautious basis for identifying context-sensitive patterns. Latent mean comparisons were not interpreted unless at least partial scalar invariance was supported. Primary comparative analyses relied on separate country-specific regression models, which served as the main basis for identifying context-sensitive patterns in the associations between DS dimensions and psychological distress. Accordingly, cross-cultural differences were interpreted as indicative of contextual variation rather than formal statistical moderation.

Given the non-probabilistic recruitment strategy, the different collection years (Italy 2022; South Korea 2023), and demographic imbalances (e.g., gender distribution), we conducted robustness checks to assess whether the substantive conclusions were sensitive to these sources of potential selection and composition bias (Baker et al., 2013; Bethlehem, 2010). Following standard practices for robustness checks in regression-based analyses, we re-estimated the hierarchical regression models by adding sociodemographic controls (age, gender, education level, and marital status) and examined whether key coefficients changed materially across specifications (Lu & White, 2014; Rosenbaum, 2002). In addition, we repeated the models within demographic subgroups (e.g., gender-stratified analyses) to evaluate the stability of the observed associations, acknowledging the interpretive cautions and credibility criteria recommended for subgroup analyses (Sun et al., 2010). Given the pronounced cross-country differences in marital status and gender composition observed in Table 2, subgroup and covariate-adjusted models are reported as core robustness evidence rather than as ancillary analyses.

Because leadership outcomes were not directly measured in the present dataset, results are reported and interpreted strictly as associations between DS and psychological distress, with leadership implications framed as theory-based inferences about relational functioning and emotion regulation rather than as demonstrated effects on leadership effectiveness or performance (Cronbach &

Meehl, 1955; Shadish et al., 2002). Non-significant findings (e.g., weaker associations in the South Korean sample for specific subscales such as FO) are reported transparently and discussed as theoretically informative, rather than treated as secondary to statistically significant results. In line with recommendations cautioning against dichotomous "significant/non-significant" interpretations, we avoid over-weighting arbitrary thresholds and emphasise estimation patterns and cross-sample consistency when interpreting effects (Gelman & Stern, 2006; Wasserstein & Lazar, 2016; Wasserstein et al., 2019). Accordingly, the Discussion avoids claims about "leadership effectiveness" and instead emphasises psychological and relational implications, as directly supported by the measures and analyses in this study.

The dataset and research materials are available on reasonable request from the corresponding author.

4. Findings

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to examine cross-cultural differences in the DSI-R subscales and OQ-45.2 total scores between Korean and Italian participants. The analysis revealed significant differences across several variables (see Table 3). Specifically, Korean participants exhibited:

- lower EC scores (i.e., higher emotional cut-off) compared to Italian participants.
- lower FO scores (i.e., higher fusion with others) compared to Italian participants.

Taken together, these findings suggest that Korean participants are more likely to manage relational intensity through emotional distancing and, at the same time, to report stronger relational enmeshment (i.e., higher fusion with others).

Additionally, correlation analysis revealed a negative association between DS and psychological distress across both groups. Specifically:

- Lower ER and EC scores (i.e., greater emotional reactivity and higher emotional cut-off, given the scoring direction) were associated with greater psychological distress in both cultural groups.
- Lower IP scores (weaker ability to maintain an independent self-position) were linked to higher psychological distress in both groups.
- FO was significantly correlated with psychological distress only in the Italian sample; this association was not statistically significant in the Korean sample.

Moreover, the strength of the associations between DS and psychological well-being varied notably between the two groups. When comparing the Italian and Korean samples, the effect sizes of these relationships tended to be stronger in the Italian group, suggesting that DS plays a more prominent role in predicting psychological distress among Italian participants.

Predictors of Psychological Distress in Italian and Korean Samples

To further examine the relationship between DS and psychological distress, two hierarchical multiple regression analyses (one for each cultural group) were performed. The predictor variables included are ER, IP, EC, and FO (see Tables 3, 4, and 5).

To enhance the interpretability of applied recommendations, we emphasise that the statistical pattern across correlations and regression models supports the same substantive conclusion in both countries: lower functional differentiation, operationalised as weaker I-positioning and more dysregulated emotional and relational functioning, is associated with higher psychological distress. This directional clarification is crucial because DSI-R subscales may be scored such that higher or lower values reflect functional versus maladaptive expressions of the named constructs, depending on coding conventions. Accordingly, the practical implications below are expressed in terms of the underlying psychological processes (e.g., dysregulated emotional reactivity, unstable I-position, rigid cut-off), rather than relying exclusively on raw scale direction.

Table 3 Results of ANOVA One-Way for mean differences between two countries

Psychological Distress	Italian M (S.D.)	South Korean M (S.D.)	F (g.l.= 1)	Sum of Squares
ER Emotional Reactivity	3.41 (.91)	3.41 (.877)	0.08	0.005
IP I-position	4.09 (.77)	3.97 (.64)	3.3	1.64
EC Emotional cut-off	4.5 (.86)	3.9 (.62)	64.5**	36.32
FO Fusion with Others	3.5 (.83)	3.3 (.67)	8.5*	4.4
Global Psychological Distress	54.7 (33.4)	55.1 (27.02)	.006	8.14

**P < .005 **P < .001*

Table 4 Correlations of differentiation of self with psychological well-being

Psychological Distress	Italy	South Korea

ER Emotional Reactivity	-.529**	-.232**
IP I-position	-.423**	-.323**
EC Emotional cut-off	-.452**	-.315**
FO Fusion with Others	-.436**	-.119

***P < .001*

Table 5 Hierarchical Linear Multiple Regression Model Predicting the Psychological Distress Levels

Psychological Distress	Italy					South Korea				
	B	*SE*	β	*t*	*p*	*B*	*SE*	β	*t*	*p*
ER Emotional Reactivity	-8.199	2.344	-.306	-3.497	**.001**	-3.393	3.894	-.097	-.871	.385
IP I-position	-6.496	2.181	-.205	-2.979	**.003**	-13.338	3.141	-.314	-4.246	**.000**
EC Emotional cut-off	-8.164	1.738	-.288	-4.697	**.000**	-13.007	3.089	-.296	-4.211	**.000**
FO Fusion with Others	-.248	2.809	-.008	-.088	.930	7.506	4.076	.187	1.841	.067

***P < .001*

Key Regression Findings

In the Italian sample, the predictors accounted for 37% of the variance in psychological distress (adjusted $R^2 = 0.37$, $F = 12.3$, $p < .001$). For the Korean sample, the predictors explained 18% of the variance (adjusted $R^2 = 0.18$, $F = 30.09$, $p < .001$).

Table 5.1 Summary of significant predictors of psychological distress

Key Regression Findings	Italy	South Korea
ER Emotional Reactivity	β = - 0.306, p < .001	
IP I-position	β = -0.205, p < .005	β = -0.314, p < .001
EC Emotional cut-off	β = - 0.288, p < .001	β = - 0.296, p < .001
FO Fusion with Others		

Taken together, these coefficients indicate that psychological distress in the Italian sample is higher when respondents report a weaker I-position and lower ER and EC scores, that is, greater emotional

reactivity and stronger emotional cut-off. In substantive terms, weaker self-definition and more dysregulated emotional and boundary-management processes appear to be the main correlates of distress in the Italian group.

Read comparatively, the synthesis table 5.1 shows both convergence and divergence across contexts. IP and EC are robust predictors in both countries, whereas ER contributes uniquely only in Italy and FO did not emerge as a unique predictor in either regression model. Table 5.1 clarifies side-by-side that the cultural contrast lies less in the overall presence of DS-distress associations than in the relative salience of specific DS dimensions.

Cultural contingency was assessed primarily through comparative patterns across country-specific models, which served as the main basis for interpreting contextual variation in the associations between DS dimensions and psychological distress. However, given the measurement constraints surrounding the Korean DSI-R and the study's emphasis on conservative interpretation, the country-stratified regression coefficients are treated here as the primary basis for substantive comparison. This choice allows the analysis to assess cultural contingency while avoiding over-precision in claims that the present dataset cannot support more definitively.

Findings revealed cross-cultural differences in DS, with significant group differences in EC and FO, whereas ER, IP, and global psychological distress did not differ significantly between Italy and South Korea (Table 3).

Moreover, DS was negatively associated with psychological distress in both cultures, although the magnitude of associations tended to be stronger in the Italian sample. Regression analyses indicated that IP and EC were significant predictors of psychological distress in both groups, whereas ER contributed significantly only to the Italian model and was not a significant predictor in the Korean model (Table 5), suggesting cross-cultural variation in the unique role of emotional reactivity when other DS dimensions are considered.

These findings highlight the cultural specificity of DS and its impact on mental well-being, suggesting that while DS is associated with psychological distress across contexts, its pathways and salience are shaped by cultural expectations. Considering these results, it is now informative to examine what this may imply for leadership-relevant functioning under relational and emotional demands.

5. Discussion

In keeping with calls for plural, situated, and culturally decolonising perspectives (Edwards et al., 2024), this study conceptualises leadership as a relational and emotionally embedded practice, shaped by culturally patterned expectations rather than by purely rational or individualistic logics of control (Park et al., 2024). This view aligns with psychosocial approaches to leadership identity, which emphasise anxiety regulation, internalised relational scripts, and context-specific norms of legitimacy over static competencies alone (Ford, 2010). By comparing Italy and South Korea, the study challenges the implicit universalism of dominant Western leadership ideals and foregrounds alternative cultural logics through which authority, care, emotional display, and relational boundaries are enacted.

This comparison is not merely descriptive; it enables an examination of whether the psychosocial capacities assumed in mainstream leadership models operate similarly across contexts or whether their meaning and consequences are culturally contingent. Within this framework, DS offers a coherent analytical lens because it captures relationally embedded self-processes, such as emotional reactivity, self-positioning, and boundary regulation, that plausibly underpin leadership-relevant functioning under interpersonal pressure.

At the same time, we acknowledge an important scope condition: the empirical outcomes are limited to self-reported differentiation of self (DSI-R) and psychological distress (OQ-45.2). Accordingly, we do not claim to measure leadership effectiveness directly; rather, the findings are interpreted as indicative of leadership-relevant psychological functioning under relational pressure, while the leadership implications are treated as theoretically grounded propositions requiring direct testing against leadership outcomes in future research. This positioning allows us to address the research questions sequentially, first by examining the overall association between differentiation of self and leadership-relevant functioning, and then by considering the role of cultural context in shaping these associations.

With respect to RQ1, we examine how differentiation of self, both globally and across its dimensions, relates to leadership-relevant psychological functioning under relational pressure. Across the pooled sample, the findings support the claim that DS is meaningfully associated with adaptive psychosocial functioning under relational strain, a condition central to leadership-relevant functioning in roles marked by interpersonal complexity, responsibility, and exposure to conflict.

In line with H1, higher overall differentiation was associated with lower psychological distress, suggesting that DS functions as a resilience-relevant resource in emotionally demanding interpersonal environments. This result is consistent with conceptions of leadership as an identity project negotiated through relationships, in which self-regulatory capacity and anxiety management shape how individuals relate to themselves and to others (Ford, 2010), and with the view that leadership functioning cannot be separated from the emotional infrastructures in which it is enacted (Bolden & Gosling, 2006).

At the subscale level, the evidence provides differentiated support for H1a. Lower ER and EC scores, which in the DSI-R scoring direction indicate greater emotional reactivity and stronger emotional cut-off, were associated with higher psychological distress across both cultural groups. This suggests that dysregulated reactivity and rigid distancing function as distress-linked self-processes. I-position (IP) was negatively associated with distress, consistent with its role as a protective capacity to maintain a coherent, values-anchored self-definition under relational pressure. More precisely, I-position primarily reflects a form of internal emotional regulation, that is, the ability to remain anchored in one's values and beliefs while managing relational anxiety, although it may also translate into context-sensitive behavioural expressions depending on situational and cultural constraints. Fusion with others (FO) showed a more context-sensitive pattern: it was significantly associated with distress in the Italian sample but not in the Korean sample, and it did not uniquely predict distress in either regression model once the other DS dimensions were considered. This pattern complicates any simple assumption that greater interdependence necessarily entails greater distress, suggesting instead that the significance of relational closeness depends on how it is experienced, interpreted, and regulated within a given cultural script.

Regression analyses further strengthen the leadership-relevant interpretation. IP and EC emerged as significant predictors of distress in both cultural groups, whereas ER contributed uniquely only to the Italian model, and FO did not uniquely predict distress in either model. Across contexts, two processes appear especially consequential: the capacity to maintain a self-defined position (IP) and the tendency to manage relational anxiety through emotional distancing (EC). From a leadership-relevant perspective, these processes map directly onto recurrent role demands, namely sustaining role clarity and decision integrity while remaining sufficiently engaged to support trust,

communication, and coordination. The findings therefore suggest that the psychosocial core of leadership-relevant functioning is less a matter of any single emotional style than of self-position clarity combined with flexible boundary management. In this sense, the observed associations between DS dimensions and distress provide indirect support for H1a, insofar as lower distress indicates more adaptive functioning likely to sustain judgement, resilience, and interpersonal effectiveness in leadership roles. This interpretation is consistent with adjacent leadership constructs that emphasise emotional regulation and relational competence, including emotional intelligence traditions (Goleman, 1998; Salovey & Mayer, 1990), while also acknowledging critiques of their treatment as universal prerequisites for leadership (Antonakis et al., 2009). Rather than assuming universality, our findings suggest that DS offers a psychosocial, mechanism-based account of why self-regulation and boundary management matter for leadership-relevant functioning, and why their manifestations vary across cultural contexts.

We next examine whether the DS-functioning links observed in the pooled sample remain stable across contexts or vary according to culturally embedded relational expectations, emotional norms, and authority scripts. Specifically, RQ2 addressed the extent to which cultural context (Italy vs South Korea) shapes variation in the associations between differentiation of self and leadership-relevant functioning. The results indicate cultural contingency in two interrelated respects: mean-level differences suggest distinct baseline configurations of relational and emotional self-processes, and the strength and unique contribution of specific DS dimensions in predicting psychological distress vary across contexts.

At the descriptive level, ANOVA revealed significant cross-cultural differences in EC and FO, whereas ER, IP, and overall psychological distress did not differ significantly between groups (Table 3). These differences should not be read as direct indicators of leadership strategies. However, they remain theoretically informative because leadership roles intensify relational demands and emotional strain. Higher EC combined with lower FO in the Korean sample suggests a configuration in which relational distance may coexist with stronger fusion-related tendencies, rather than simply indicating reduced relational involvement. This underscores that culturally normative interdependence may take forms that are not necessarily experienced as distressing. These baseline configurations matter because they shape what counts as "regulated," "professional," or "appropriate" conduct in each setting and influence how followers interpret

leaders' emotional displays and boundary management (Park et al., 2024). In other words, the same behavioural surface, such as emotional restraint, may signal competence in one setting and disengagement in another, depending on culturally embedded prototypes of legitimacy.

At the relational level, cultural contingency is most evident in the strength and specificity of the associations between DS dimensions and distress. Across both samples, DS dimensions were significantly associated with psychological distress (Table 4), although associations were generally stronger in the Italian group. Regression analyses showed cross-cultural invariance in the predictive role of IP and EC, but divergence in the contribution of ER and in the correlational significance of FO (Table 5). These results provide partial support for H2. Specifically, the non-significant FO-distress association in the Korean sample is consistent with the expectation that FO would be less strongly linked to distress in South Korea, where relational interdependence is more normative and less likely to be experienced as psychologically costly. This suggests that some forms of interdependence may be culturally buffered, such that fusion-related tendencies are not automatically distressing when they align with norms of harmony and embeddedness. At the same time, this pattern points to an important measurement boundary condition: fusion-related items may carry different meanings across contexts, and their non-significance may reflect either genuine cultural buffering or differences in item interpretation. In either case, the implication is one of cultural contingency rather than deficit.

H2 also anticipated that emotional cut-off would show weaker associations with distress in South Korea than in Italy. The results do not support this expectation, as EC remained a significant predictor of distress in both groups. This non-confirmation is theoretically important because it suggests that even where distance and restraint are culturally normalised, emotional cut-off may still operate as a distress-linked coping style when it takes the form of rigid withdrawal rather than flexible boundary management. In other words, cultural normativity does not eliminate the costs of chronic disengagement. This distinction between socially endorsed emotional moderation and psychologically costly cut-off is especially relevant to leadership-relevant functioning in high-demand relational roles.

Finally, H2 predicted that I-position would show a stronger negative association with distress in Italy than in South Korea. The results indicate that IP is a significant predictor in both groups and therefore operates as a cross-cultural protective factor. While correlations were generally stronger

in the Italian sample, the more defensible conclusion is that IP's protective value is culturally robust rather than Italy-specific. In this sense, its adaptiveness in the Korean context appears to rely primarily on internal emotional regulation, as the capacity to maintain a stable and value-anchored sense of self while managing relational anxiety, rather than on overt behavioural assertion, which may remain constrained by norms of harmony and relational sensitivity. Conceptually, this supports interpreting IP as a foundational capacity for leadership-relevant functioning, enabling principled decision-making, role clarity, and resistance to anxiety contagion, even though its behavioural expression must remain culturally congruent. This suggests that I-position should be understood not primarily as a behavioural prescription, but as an underlying regulatory capacity that leadership development initiatives can cultivate, helping individuals sustain clarity, emotional stability, and principled judgement under pressure, while adapting their behavioural expression to culturally appropriate forms of relational engagement.

Taken together, the findings suggest that DS contributes to leadership-relevant functioning by shaping how individuals regulate anxiety and manage relational boundaries under pressure. Two mechanisms appear especially consequential across contexts: sustaining a coherent self-position (IP) and avoiding rigid withdrawal (EC). ER appears more culturally contingent in its unique contribution, possibly reflecting differences in emotional display norms and in the organisational consequences of overt reactivity. FO, by contrast, appears to be the most culturally dependent dimension in its linkage to distress, reinforcing the argument that interdependence is not uniformly maladaptive and must be interpreted in relation to culturally specific scripts of relatedness.

This mechanism-focused interpretation also resonates with paradoxical leadership perspectives, which emphasise that leaders routinely face competing demands, including care and authority, closeness and role distance, and authenticity and restraint. Paradoxical leadership research suggests that mindful awareness helps leaders remain composed while navigating such tensions, thereby supporting individual and collective effectiveness (Qu et al., 2022). In our framework, DS can be understood as a complementary psychosocial resource: not a leadership style, but a set of relational self-processes that may help leaders remain anchored while adapting their emotional and relational conduct to context. This is consistent with Collinson's (2014) call for paradoxical thinking in leadership studies, in which tensions are not resolved through universal prescriptions but navigated through contextual awareness and psychological flexibility.

The findings also carry implications for leadership selection, development, and support. These implications are most usefully framed as an integrated cycle of assessment, training, and evaluation, while remaining consistent with the evidentiary limits of the present study. Because the empirical outcomes are restricted to self-reported differentiation of self (DSI-R) and psychological distress (OQ-45.2), the applied implications concern the strengthening of leadership-relevant psychological functioning under relational pressure rather than the prediction of leadership performance as such. Within this scope, the cross-cultural robustness of I-position and emotional cut-off as predictors of distress suggests that organisations may treat low IP and elevated EC as developmental risk signals for decision strain, relational withdrawal, and difficulty maintaining clarity under conflict, without reifying these profiles as fixed traits or using them as exclusionary criteria.

In the assessment phase, organisations may integrate DS profiles and well-being indicators into leadership selection and internal mobility, especially for roles with high relational demands, such as people management, crisis response, and boundary-spanning coordination. A DSI-R profile can be paired with a confidential OQ-45.2 check as a preventive well-being measure linked to feedback and support pathways. To avoid relying only on self-report, assessment may also include structured interviews and simulations designed to elicit DS-related processes under leadership strain. Scenarios such as conflict de-escalation, corrective feedback, stakeholder negotiation, and responses to public criticism can help assess how ER, IP, EC, and FO are expressed behaviourally. This is particularly important in cross-cultural settings, where similar behaviours may carry different meanings. For example, restrained affect may indicate culturally appropriate regulation in South Korea, while expressive affect in Italy may reflect engagement unless accompanied by escalation and poor recovery. These insights can help calibrate placement and development decisions more effectively.

In the training phase, interventions should be mechanism-focused and culturally adapted, targeting the DS dimensions most closely linked to distress regulation. Because I-position (IP) appears to function as a cross-cultural protective factor, leadership development should strengthen values-based self-definition under pressure, including the ability to articulate a principled stance, communicate boundaries respectfully, and maintain role clarity during disagreement. Training may include values clarification, rehearsal of position statements, and coached practice in managing

conflict without escalation. Given the consistent association between emotional cut-off (EC) and distress, programmes should also promote flexible boundary management, helping leaders recognise early withdrawal cues, use temporary "pause" boundaries during acute stress, and re-engage through repair practices once tensions subside. In multicultural teams, training should combine cultural perspective-taking with relational reconnection skills. Cultural tailoring is also important for emotional reactivity: Italy may benefit more from downshifting strategies, whereas South Korea may benefit more from face-sensitive directness.

In the evaluation phase, programme effectiveness is best treated as an iterative learning process rather than a one-off audit. At minimum, evaluation designs can track pre-post change in distress (OQ-45.2) and DS profiles (DSI-R) as indicators of psychosocial adaptation, collected confidentially and used for coaching and support. However, where the organisational aim is to test whether improvements in these psychosocial capacities translate into leadership-relevant outcomes, evaluation should also include leadership criteria. These may include 360-degree assessments of conflict management, communication clarity, trust, and psychological safety, complemented where feasible by simulation-based behavioural ratings and objective proxies such as escalation rates, grievance frequency, absence, turnover intentions, and team climate indicators. At the organisational level, periodic cross-cultural reviews of recurring incidents, such as miscommunication patterns or conflict episodes in multinational units, can help refine training content and clarify the boundary conditions under which restraint is adaptive rather than harmful. Embedding assessment, training, and evaluation within a single cycle supports a culturally decolonising and context-sensitive approach to leadership development (Edwards et al., 2024), consistent with the view that leadership effectiveness is inseparable from the emotional and cultural infrastructures in which it is enacted (Bolden & Gosling, 2006) and from the relational co-construction of authenticity and integrity (Park et al., 2024).

Additionally, the findings suggest that EC is associated with distress in both cultural contexts, even where emotional restraint is socially valued. This highlights the need to distinguish adaptive boundary management from maladaptive cut-off. Emotional cut-off may be temporarily functional as a short-term response to acute stress, if it is followed by reconnection and relational repair. It becomes harmful when it turns into a rigid and chronic pattern of withdrawal, undermining psychological safety, communication, and trust. The key intervention target is therefore not

eliminating distance but fostering flexibility in moving from temporary distancing to renewed engagement, especially in multicultural teams where restrained behaviour may be interpreted differently across cultural settings.

6. Managerial implications

The findings have practical implications for assessment, training, and evaluation in leadership development, especially in multicultural and multinational settings. Across contexts, differentiation of self (DS) appears relevant to leadership-relevant functioning because it is associated with emotion regulation, relational boundary management, and clarity of self-position under pressure (Friedman, 2007; Süloğlu & Güler, 2021). However, the results also indicate that DS dimensions do not operate uniformly across contexts, underscoring the need for cultural calibration.

For Global HR Managers, this means that leadership development should not rely on uniform behavioural templates but should instead adapt training content to the relational norms, emotional display rules, and authority structures of the local context.

In the Italian context, where relational engagement is more openly expressed, higher functioning may coexist with greater escalation risk under pressure. Here, I-position (IP) and emotional cut-off (EC) emerge as robust predictors, while emotional reactivity (ER) also contributes uniquely to distress. Accordingly, managerial interventions should prioritise IP strengthening, EC flexibility, and ER downshifting skills, for example, through simulations of conflict and feedback, training in recovery after disagreement, and techniques that support principled clarity without relational over-escalation. In practical terms, leadership training in Milan or similar Southern European settings could include modules on managing emotional activation in high-involvement interactions, maintaining constructive dialogue during disagreement, and preventing reactive escalation in team coordination. Role-play exercises, reflective debriefings, and coaching on emotionally charged decision episodes may be especially useful in helping leaders remain self-defined while preserving collaboration.

In the South Korean context, by contrast, IP and EC remain the most robust predictors, whereas ER does not contribute uniquely once the other DS dimensions are considered. This suggests that development efforts should focus primarily on strengthening principled self-positioning within hierarchical norms and on distinguishing adaptive restraint from rigid disengagement through

culturally calibrated assessment and coaching practices. For HR managers operating in Seoul or in comparable Confucian-influenced environments, this implies the need for training modules centred on expressing principled disagreement respectfully, managing emotional restraint in hierarchical structures, and recognising when apparently composed behaviour may conceal withdrawal, silence, or relational disengagement. In these contexts, coaching should help leaders develop a calm and face-sensitive I-position, that is, the ability to communicate clarity and agency without threatening harmony, status order, or group cohesion.

For multinational organisations, these findings suggest that leadership systems should avoid imposing a single model of effective emotional conduct. Instead, DS-informed programmes should combine a common developmental core, especially around IP, with context-specific calibration of ER- and FO-related priorities. This supports a culturally embedded view of leadership and reinforces the need to interpret DS dimensions as context-sensitive regulatory patterns rather than universal deficits (Neck et al., 2006).

More broadly, organisations should integrate DS-informed assessment and support into leadership pipelines not as exclusionary tools, but as mechanisms for identifying developmental priorities, supporting well-being, and improving relational functioning over time (Antonakis et al., 2009; Rajah et al., 2011). This also reinforces the need for cross-cultural validation when family-systems constructs are extended into organisational and leadership research (Chung & Gale, 2006; Lee & Haas, 1993). A practical implication is that multinational firms may benefit from designing differentiated learning pathways, for instance, one stream focused on de-escalation, feedback repair, and emotionally intense peer coordination, and another focused on principled voice, hierarchical communication, and the prevention of emotionally silent disengagement.

Finally, the findings suggest that leader well-being should be treated as both an organisational and individual responsibility. If IP and EC are consistently associated with distress across contexts, institutions should consider integrating confidential psychosocial support into leadership development infrastructures. In parallel, leadership evaluation should prioritise functional criteria, such as clarity, trust, psychological safety, and relational repair, rather than relying on culturally narrow prototypes of effective conduct.

In addition, the observed role of Emotional Reactivity (ER) highlights its direct relevance for executive decision-making, as heightened reactivity may impair judgement under pressure,

increase susceptibility to escalation, and reduce the capacity to process complex information in high-stakes situations, whereas effective regulation of emotional responses can support more balanced, timely, and context-sensitive decisions. This position aligns with critiques of universalist leadership models and with calls to broaden the epistemic foundations of leadership scholarship (Edwards et al., 2024; Park et al., 2024). From an implementation perspective, this could involve embedding culturally sensitive psychosocial check-ins, developmental coaching, and context-aware leadership diagnostics into talent management systems, so that evaluation does not merely reward visible assertiveness or composure but captures how leaders remain functional under relational strain. Table 6 summarises these implications by translating the main DS patterns observed across contexts into evidence-based and culturally calibrated guidance for assessment, training, and evaluation.

Table 6. Evidence-based, culturally calibrated implications of DS patterns for programmatic managerial guidance (assessment, training, evaluation)

Cultural Context	The moderating effect of Differentiation of Self	Leadership Implication	Programmatic managerial guidance (assessment, training, evaluation)
Italy	ER uniquely contributes to regression; IP and EC are robust predictors; FO does not uniquely predict distress.	Higher relational engagement may coexist with escalation risk under pressure; clarity of self-position and flexible boundary management are central constraints/enablers of functioning.	Use DS profiles as developmental signals (not exclusion) and verify with simulations of conflict/feedback. Prioritise IP strengthening (values-anchored stance, respectful boundaries) and EC flexibility (reversible distancing + repair). Add ER downshifting micro-skills (recovery after disagreement, reappraisal, decision protocols). Evaluate via pre–post DSI-R/OQ-45.2 plus 360° ratings on conflict management, clarity, and trust.
South Korea	IP and EC are robust predictors; ER does not contribute uniquely when other DS dimensions are considered; FO–distress link is weaker/non-significant.	Composure and harmony-preserving conduct may be adaptive, but rigid cut-off remains distress-linked; IP supports principled clarity expressed within hierarchical norms.	Assess IP and EC with culturally calibrated simulations that distinguish skilled restraint from rigid disengagement (e.g., follow-up/repair after tension). Develop IP with face-sensitive clarity and strengthen reversible boundary strategies that prevent chronic cut-off. Treat ER modules as secondary to IP/EC (focus on graded directness and constructive engagement). Evaluate via DSI-R/OQ-45.2 plus relational indicators (psychological safety, feedback flow) and

			periodic incident reviews to refine boundary conditions.
Multinational contexts	Across contexts, IP and EC show the most consistent links to distress; the interpretation of ER and FO is more culture-contingent.	Adaptive leadership-relevant functioning in multicultural settings depends on flexible regulation rather than a single "ideal" emotional style.	Embed DS-informed assessment and coaching within global leadership programmes alongside cultural calibration. Standardise the cycle (assessment, training, evaluation) while localising delivery: common IP core, context-specific ER/FO emphasis, and explicit guidance on when distancing is adaptive vs harmful. Track outcomes longitudinally and test leadership criteria directly when available.

7. Theoretical implications.

Theoretically, the study contributes to critical leadership studies by challenging universalist assumptions embedded in dominant psychological and managerial frameworks and by foregrounding DS as a mechanism-based, culturally sensitive lens for leadership-relevant functioning. Recent research highlighting how impression management shapes perceptions of authenticity and behavioural integrity further supports a relational co-construction view of leadership effectiveness (Park et al., 2024). In line with Collinson (2014), our findings suggest that leadership theory benefits from embracing paradoxes rather than resolving them through binary thinking. DS is not a prescription for autonomy at all costs; it is a lens for understanding how autonomy and interdependence, expression and restraint, and closeness and distance are navigated under cultural constraint.

8. Limitations and future research

Several limitations qualify the interpretation and generalisability of these findings and point to clear directions for future research. In particular, the results concerning Emotional Cutoff (EC) in collectivist settings should be interpreted as exploratory. First, although DS was assessed in both cultural groups, the Differentiation of Self Inventory-Revised (DSI-R) has not been adequately validated for the Korean context. Without a culturally adapted and psychometrically established Korean version, cross-cultural comparisons may reflect measurement artefacts as much as substantive differences. Future research should therefore prioritise the validation of a Korean DSI-R and, more broadly, conduct formal tests of measurement equivalence across groups. Second, the study relies on two samples drawn from specific national and sociocultural contexts, with relatively

modest sample sizes and a gender imbalance, particularly in the Italian sample. Future studies should recruit larger and more gender-balanced samples, include more male participants, and extend the design beyond Italy and South Korea. Replication across additional Asian and Mediterranean countries, as well as across different life stages, would strengthen external validity and clarify whether the observed patterns generalise beyond the populations examined here. Third, the study is cross-sectional and relies exclusively on self-report measures, which prevents directionality or causal ordering and increases the risk of shared-method variance. Although the DSI-R has demonstrated empirical utility, Bowen (1978) emphasised that differentiation processes are often best captured through multi-method and relationally grounded assessment strategies. Future research should therefore integrate qualitative and observational approaches, such as family history interviews, genograms, and structured observations, to triangulate DS and better capture culture-specific meanings and regulatory strategies. In addition, the study did not collect systematic data on participants' occupational role, managerial seniority, or organisational context, which limits the interpretation of the findings in relation to leadership-relevant functioning in workplace settings.

Most importantly, the present study does not include direct leadership variables such as role occupancy, leadership behaviours, follower outcomes, or behavioural indicators of leadership functioning. As a result, the findings cannot establish whether DS predicts leadership outcomes in organisational settings, nor whether culture moderates these associations at the level of actual performance. The next step is therefore programmatic. Future studies should explicitly operationalise leadership-relevant outcomes through behavioural indicators, 360-degree assessments, supervisor ratings, team climate measures, and multi-source designs. Longitudinal, multi-wave, and multilevel designs, for example, with leaders nested within teams, would be especially valuable for testing whether DS-informed interventions reduce distress and improve leadership functioning over time, and whether DS subscales operate at both individual and relational levels. Such designs would allow testing the leadership-relevant propositions advanced here directly rather than inferring them indirectly.

More broadly, this study opens a promising research agenda. Prior evidence shows that associations between DS and well-being vary across cultural contexts (Chung & Gale, 2006; Lampis et al., 2017; Lampis et al., 2020), and comparative work suggests that cultural settings

shape how differentiation relates to relational functioning (Kim et al., 2014). Building on these insights, future leadership-focused research could examine whether: (a) I-position and emotional cut-off predict leadership outcomes indirectly through reduced distress and improved relational functioning, (b) emotional reactivity functions as a context-sensitive risk or resource depending on cultural norms and organisational emotional display rules, and (c) fusion with others is more strongly reflected in team-level outcomes, such as cohesion and conflict patterns, even when it does not uniquely predict individual distress in regression models. Integrating insights from this cross-cultural literature may support the development of leadership programmes that are more culturally responsive while also fostering resilience, emotional intelligence, and adaptive problem-solving (Antonakis et al., 2009; Rajah et al., 2011; Chung & Gale, 2006; Kim et al., 2014; Lampis et al., 2017; Lampis et al., 2025; Lampis et al., 2020). In line with Bolden and Gosling (2006), such an agenda would help move leadership research beyond rigid taxonomies of traits or styles and toward a more context-sensitive understanding of lived experience, emotional complexity, and cultural embeddedness.

9. Conclusions

This study advances a culturally responsive view of differentiation of self (DS) as a psychosocial self-process relevant to leadership functioning. By comparing Italian and South Korean participants, we show that DS is associated with psychological distress in both groups, and that cross-cultural variation in the strength of these associations exists. In doing so, the study challenges universalistic assumptions about emotional autonomy in leadership and supports a more situated understanding of how individuals regulate self-definition and relational distance under strain.

In line with plural and critical theorising in leadership studies (Edwards & Schedlitzki, 2023; Tourish, 2022), our findings also suggest that patterns such as emotional cut-off or fusion with others, often treated as uniformly maladaptive in Western psychological frameworks, may take on different functional meanings in collectivist settings. Rather than merely applying existing models, we re-map them to make visible the emotional and cultural infrastructures through which leadership identities and functioning are sustained (Edwards et al., 2024). By adopting a stance of critical companionship, this work both problematises dominant paradigms and opens space for emotionally and culturally grounded alternatives in theorising leadership-relevant functioning (Edwards et al., 2024).

To conclude, this study makes an original contribution by highlighting culturally contingent psychosocial mechanisms through which individuals maintain a clear sense of self and regulate relational closeness under pressure. Because these processes are closely linked to how people manage responsibility, interpersonal tension, and decision-making, they offer a valuable foundation for understanding leadership development and functioning. More broadly, the findings open a promising avenue for future research to build context-sensitive models and further explore the psychosocial foundations of leadership.

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