

# The Qur'anic Model of the "Differentiated Human": Reinterpreting Bowen's Concept of Bowen's Differentiation in Light of "Piety" and "*Furqān*"

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## **Abstract**

The concept of "Differentiation of self" in Bowen's Family Systems Theory, regarded as the cornerstone of mental health, refers to individuals' ability to separate rationality from emotion and to maintain balance between individuality and togetherness. Considering the lack of an indigenous model in family psychology, the present study aims to articulate a "Differentiated Human" model based on the teachings of the Holy Qur'an. The research method is "Thematic Analysis" with a qualitative approach. The study population consisted of all Qur'anic verses, with a focus on authoritative Shi'i exegeses, especially *al-Mīzān*. After purposeful note-taking, the data were analyzed using three-stage coding in MAXQDA software. The findings showed that "Piety," as a process of self-regulation, is the overarching theme of Qur'anic differentiation, which is actualized through "*Furqān*" (the faculty of discernment). At the intrapersonal level, this model includes cognitive components (self-awareness, faith-based rationality) and behavioral components (emotion regulation, patience, and trust in God). At the interpersonal level, through an assertive communication style (based on authenticity, clarity, unconditional respect, and empathy) and boundary management (rejecting fusion and emotional

cutoff), it establishes a balance between independence and intimacy. Ultimately, the results indicate that the Qur'anic model, by adding monotheistic and innate dimensions to psychological components, provides a rich framework for Islamic counseling and elevates the path of growth from mental health to spiritual perfection.

**Keywords:** Differentiation of self, Bowen Family Systems Theory, Emotional Maturity, Thematic Analysis, Piety, *Furqān*.

## **Introduction**

Among contemporary psychological approaches, Bowen's Family Systems Theory emphasizes the fundamental role of family relationships in the development of the self and in enhancing emotion regulation and relational functioning. The cornerstone of this theory is the concept of "Differentiation of self," which explains an individual's emotional maturity based on their ability to distinguish emotional processes from rational ones, as well as their capacity to balance intimacy and autonomy in relationships (Bowen, 1978: 94). The clinical and empirical significance of this concept has been confirmed in numerous studies; research shows that high differentiation is correlated with positive psychological indicators such as emotion regulation (Brunet, 2024; Güler and Karaca, 2020), healthy cognitive functioning (Rodríguez, 2016, cited in Aghaei, 2020 AD/1399 SH), constructive interpersonal conflict resolution (Brown and Errington, 2024), marital satisfaction (Barzegar Kahnamuei, 2014 AD/1393 SH), and better quality of life (Warch and Balter-Herring, 2024). Conversely, low levels of differentiation can predict various difficulties, including chronic anxiety (Goldenberg et al., 2016), emotion-regulation problems (Fadaei et al., 2018 AD/1397 SH), impulsivity, and borderline personality disorder (Khodaei et al., 2020 AD/1399 SH).

Despite these strong empirical findings, the direct application of this theory within an Islamic cultural context faces challenges. Although Bowen's theory is effective, it rests on secular anthropological foundations that define the ultimate goal of development as "Psychological Independence" and "Reduction of Anxiety," whereas within the Islamic epistemological framework, mental health serves as a prelude to "Spiritual Perfection" and "Nearness to God." In this regard, the Holy Qur'an, through profound concepts such as "Nafs," "Heart," "Piety," and "Furqān," offers a precise blueprint of personality architecture that has the capacity to reinterpret this psychological construct.

A review of prior research shows that although some studies in Iran have examined the relationship between differentiation and other variables (e.g., Rafezi and Sabouri, 2022 AD/1401 SH; Sabzevari et al., 2022 AD/1401 SH) or have addressed components related to differentiation such as emotion-regulation strategies (Eghbali, 2022 AD/1401 SH; Karami et al., 2020 AD/1399 SH) and interpersonal relationship patterns from an Islamic perspective (Sadeqiseresht et al., 2022 AD/1401 SH), there remains a clear research gap in foundational conceptualization. Most existing studies use a "Comparative-Correlational" approach, and no research was found that, using a rigorous qualitative methodology (such as thematic analysis) and grounded in rational-Ijtihadi exegesis (such as *al-Mīzān*), explores the meaning of differentiation within the depth of the Qur'anic text. The present study, aiming to fill this theoretical gap and provide a comprehensive indigenous model, seeks to answer: 'What are the main themes related to Differentiation of self in the Qur'an, and how the relationships among them are structured?' The ultimate goal is to present a conceptual model grounded in Qur'anic principles that can provide a theoretical framework for developing family-counseling models and Islamic psychology.

## **1. Conceptualism**

For theoretical clarity, the key concepts of the research are defined as follows:

### **A) Differentiation of self**

Differentiation of self explains an individual's emotional maturity based on their ability to distinguish between emotional processes and rational processes, as well as to balance the two vital forces of "Individuality" and "Togetherness" (Bowen, 1978: 94). This concept exists on a spectrum. At the lower end are maladaptive patterns such as "Emotional Reactivity" (excessive sensitivity to stimuli), "Fusion with Others" (blurred boundaries and an intense need for approval), and "Emotional cutoff" (extreme distancing as a form of false independence). At the higher end, by achieving the "I-position," the individual is capable of maintaining an independent identity while being intimate with others (Scharron and Friedlander, 1998).

### **B) Emotional Maturity**

The American Psychological Association (APA) defines emotional maturity as a "High and appropriate level of control and expression of emotions." Emotional maturity is the ability to manage one's own emotions and evaluate the emotions of others to make appropriate decisions (Rafidali, 2017: 157). Bowen considers differentiation to be synonymous with emotional maturity. The difference between differentiation and maturity is that differentiation is a characteristic not only of individuals but also of relationships (Bowen, 1978: 120).

### **C) Piety**

"Piety" literally means "Protection" and self-restraint (Rāghib Iṣ fahānī, 1991 AD/1412 AH: 881). In technical terms, piety is a spiritual disposition that, by controlling the "Lower self," brings the human perceptual and behavioral system

under the management of reason and religious law (cf. Ṭ abāt abā' ī, 1997 AD/1417 AH: 3, 367).

#### **D) *Furqān* (Discernment)**

"*Furqān*" is derived from the root "*Faraqa*," meaning something that is a means of distinction and separation between two things (such as truth and falsehood) (Ibn Fāris, 1983 AD/1404 AH: 4, 449; Qarashī, 1992 AD/1371 SH: 5, 169). In Qur'anic terminology, it is an inner light that is the product of *Piety*, bestowing upon a person the ability to discern truth from falsehood and correct thoughts from false emotions at critical junctures (cf. Qara'ati, 2008 AD/1388 SH: 3, 304-305).

## **2. Methodology**

The present study was conducted using an inductive "Thematic Analysis" based on the model by Braun and Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis is a systematic and flexible process for deeply understanding textual data, enabling the transformation of scattered and diverse data into a rich, coherent, and detailed analytical framework (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 80). This method possesses a high capacity for extracting theories from religious texts (Etratdoost, 2017 AD/1397 SH: 56-57). The study population comprised all Qur'anic verses, with a focus on the exegeses of *al-Mīzān* and *Noor*. Purposeful sampling began with the Surahs of "*al-Mu'minūn*" and "*al-Furqān*" as starting points and continued until theoretical saturation was achieved through keyword searches in the "*Jame' al-Tafasir Noor*" software. The data were analyzed in MAXQDA software through three stages of coding (basic, organizing, and overarching) and the thematic network was mapped. The validity of the findings was ensured by Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria, including prolonged engagement, peer debriefing, rich description, and an audit trail.

### **3. Findings: Explanation and Analysis of the Qur'anic Differentiation Thematic Network**

The qualitative and inductive analysis of the Holy Qur'anic verses led to the identification of a coherent, dynamic, and hierarchical network of themes related to the concept of "Differentiation of self." This conceptual network indicates that the Holy Qur'an presents a comprehensive model for personality growth and emotional maturity that is not only compatible with modern psychological principles but also deepens and enriches them by adding spiritual and monotheistic dimensions. At the apex of this network lies the overarching theme of "Piety and *Furqān*," which, as the central core, orients and integrates the other themes. This overarching theme encompasses two main categories of organizing themes: intrapersonal differentiation (pertaining to the architecture of an independent personality) and interpersonal differentiation (pertaining to the structure of balanced relationships). Each of these, in turn, is composed of several basic themes, which will be explained and analyzed in detail below, with reference to the noble verses.

#### **3.1. Overarching Theme: "Piety" as Process and "*Furqān*" as Product of Differentiation**

The analysis of the thematic network reveals that the central core of the Qur'anic model is the dynamic interaction between "Piety" and "*Furqān*." In this model, piety functions as the operational process of differentiation; meaning, by activating an internal shield (self-regulation) against the onslaught of emotions and carnal impulses, the individual liberates themselves from automatic emotional reactivity, thereby paving the way for rational choice.

The ultimate product of this process is the attainment of "*Furqān*," to which verse 29 of Surah *al-Anfāl* (O you who have believed, if you fear Allah, He will grant you a criterion...) explicitly attests regarding its cause-and-effect relationship.

This faculty of discernment and differentiation, which, in the words of Allamah *Ṭabāṭ abā' ī* (1996 AD/1417 AH: 3, 9), operates in three domains, thought, belief, and action, enables the subtle distinction between the "Call of Reason" and the "clamor of emotion." The fundamental distinguishing feature of this model compared to secular models is that Qur'anic differentiation (*Furqān*) is not merely an acquired cognitive skill but rather a "divine gift" bestowed upon a person in response to the struggle of piety.

### **3.1.1. Intrapersonal Differentiation: The Architecture of the Differentiated Personality**

Differentiation at the intrapersonal level refers to an individual's capacity to manage their inner world, establish a coherent identity, and most importantly, distinguish rational processes from emotional reactions. This dimension, which forms the foundation of psychological autonomy, takes shape in the Qur'anic model through two complementary and interconnected sets of capacities: "Cognitive capacities that construct the epistemic foundation of identity, and behavioral capacities that manifest and consolidate this identity in practice."

#### **3.1.1.1. Cognitive Capacities: The Foundation of a Differentiated Identity**

These capacities relate to the individual's cognitive structure, beliefs, and value system, which together provide the essential basis for a defined and autonomous self.

##### **A) Self-Awareness (Knowledge of the Self) and the Central Role of the "Heart"**

The cornerstone of any growth and differentiation is self-knowledge. The Qur'an presents the human being as a complex and multidimensional entity within whom a struggle between opposing forces takes place. By describing various levels of the soul, the Qur'an invites human beings to undertake an inward journey: from the commanding soul, which strongly urges toward evil and the unrestrained following of passions and impulses (Yūsuf: 53), to the self-reproaching soul, which represents the awakened conscience that reproaches the individual after wrongdoing (al-Qīyāmah: 2), and ultimately to the tranquil soul, which through faith and remembrance of God attains the highest level of peace, stability, and inner integration and represents the culmination of mental health and spiritual perfection (al-Fajr: 27-28).

The center of these perceptions, emotions, and inner transformations is the heart. In Qur'anic discourse, the heart is far more than a physical organ; it is the locus of consciousness, understanding, faith, and emotion (Ṭabāṭ abā' ī, 1996 AD/1417 AH: 9, 46). The Qur'an describes psychological health and illness through the metaphors of the "Sound Heart" and the "Diseased Heart." The sound heart (al-Shu' arā' : 89) is one purified of polytheism, hatred, and hypocrisy and receptive to truth and reality. Such a heart is soft (al-Ḥadīd: 16), tranquil (al-Ra' d: 28), and filled with mercy (al-Ḥadīd: 27). In contrast, the *diseased heart* (al-Baqarah: 10) is the locus of doubt, hypocrisy, hardness (al-Baqarah: 74), and pathological emotions; it becomes sealed (Muḥ ammad: 24) and loses the capacity for discernment (Ṭabāṭ abā' ī, 1996 AD/1417 AH: 18, 240).

Accordingly, Qur'anic self-awareness is a process in which individuals, by reflecting on the states of their heart and the levels of their soul, gain deep knowledge of their strengths, weaknesses, tendencies, and inner emotions. Neglect of this inner world leads to "Self-forgetfulness," which the Qur'an associates with "Forgetfulness of God" and regards as a cause for the formation of a "False self" shaped by the

expectations of others and external values (al-Ḥashr: 19). In contrast, purification and self-knowledge are the primary conditions for success (al-Shams: 9-10) and for attaining a "True Self" that is coherent and integrated (cf. Qara'ati, 2009 AD/1388 SH: 10, 498-501), capable of acting in an authentic and differentiated manner. This profound self-awareness is an essential prerequisite for managing emotions and distinguishing reason from feeling.

### **B) Faith-Based Rationality (*Ulū al-Albāb*)**

The second cognitive pillar of differentiation is rationality. The Qur'an assigns a unique and elevated status to the intellect, repeatedly inviting human beings to reason, reflect, contemplate, and deeply observe the signs of God in both the external world and within themselves (al-Fuṣṣilat: 53; al-Baqarah: 171; al-Anfāl: 22; Āli 'Imrān: 191; al-A'raf: 176).

The etymology of the word " 'Aql," (intellect) derived from " 'Iqā'l" (the rope used to restrain a camel's knee), beautifully reveals its primary function in Islamic anthropology. The intellect is the restraining force that controls and manages the rebellious impulses of the command soul and the unrestrained passions (Ibn Manẓūr, 1993 AD/1414 AH: 11, 458). From this perspective, blindly following emotions and impulsive reactions is considered a sign of neglecting reason or of its weakness. The Qur'an repeatedly attributes deviant behavior and misguidance to the absence of rational reflection (al-Mulk: 10; al-Furqān: 44), and contrasts the following of conjecture and desire with the following of knowledge, proof, and divine guidance (al-Najm: 23; al-Kahf: 28).

However, Qur'anic rationality is not merely a dry or instrumental rationalism of the kind sometimes found in certain Western psychological approaches. Rather, it is faith-based rationality, meaning that reason reaches its perfection and insight in the light of faith. It emerges from the integration of logical reasoning with inner spiritual

perception and the light of divine guidance. The Qur'an attributes this elevated level of understanding to the *Ulū al-Albāb* (people of deep understanding or possessors of enlightened intellect) (Āli ' Imrān: 190-191). These individuals not only think deeply but also possess profound faith in God; thus rationality and faith are interwoven within their being (Ṭ abāṭ abā' ī, 1996 AD/1417 AH: 17, 251).

This faith-based rationality directly leads to the faculty of *Furqān* (the power of discernment and differentiation). A person who has attained this level of cognitive development is able to distinguish between their thoughts and their emotions. In situations of intense emotional pressure, such an individual does not become captive to automatic reactions; rather, by evaluating the situation and drawing upon the power of reason and the support of faith, they are able to choose the most appropriate and balanced course of action.

This corresponds precisely to the distinction between the rational system and the emotional system in Bowen's theory. While undifferentiated individuals, in Bowen's terms, have their thoughts and feelings fused, so that when asked about their thoughts they express their feelings, *Ulū al-Albāb*, as the Qur'anic exemplars of differentiated individuals, are able to calmly and clearly distinguish between the two domains. In such individuals, heart and intellect are not in opposition; rather, they function in constructive cooperation: the heart as the center of faith and tranquility (al-Ra' d: 28), and the intellect as the instrument of analysis and regulation. This balance represents the summit of cognitive-emotional maturity.

### **C) A Stable Value System (Faith and the "I-Position")**

The third, and perhaps the most operational, cognitive component of differentiation is possessing a firm and internalized value system, which in the Qur'anic model is called faith. In the Qur'an, faith is not merely verbal confession or superficial mental acknowledgment; rather, it is a deep, heartfelt conviction that permeates all

dimensions of a person's being (cognition, emotion, and behavior) and gives direction and meaning to their life (al-Ḥujurāt: 14). This foundational belief grants the individual an integrated identity and a clear definition of who they are, what they value, and what their goals are (cf. Ṭ abāṭ abā' ī, 1996 AD/1417 AH: 18, 328). This coherent identity and stable value system lead to the development of what Bowen calls the "I-position."

The "I-position" refers to an individual's capacity to express their beliefs and convictions clearly and calmly without attacking others or surrendering to emotional pressure. A person with a strong I-position takes responsibility for their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. In stressful situations, instead of fusing with others or hiding their true self to gain approval, they can firmly and peacefully say, "This is what I believe," or "I act based on this principle." (Bowen, 1978: 180)

The Qur'an presents vivid examples of the I-position in the character of true believers. Verse 54 of Surah *al-Mā'idah* beautifully illustrates the psychological independence and inner stability of believers in the face of public pressure and emotional atmosphere: "They do not fear the blame of any blamer" in fulfilling divine values. They remain steadfast in their beliefs and covenant with God (al-Fuṣ ṣilat: 30; al-Aḥ zāb: 23), and this steadfastness is the result of a deep and internalized value system (cf. Makarem Shirazi, 1995 AD/1374 SH: 4, 416; Qara'ati, 2009 AD/1388 SH: 2, 317).

Moreover, faith creates a secure attachment to God, reducing a person's dependence on others for approval. Someone who fulfills their emotional needs and attachment through a boundless and secure divine source becomes less prone to fusion and less anxious about rejection in human relationships (Ghubari Bonab and Haddadi, 2011 AD/1390 SH: 76). This allows them to participate in relationships with greater independence and confidence. In reality, faith helps the individual abandon the

"False Self" that is constructed for pleasing others and live with their "True self." Such independence and authenticity represent the height of cognitive differentiation.

### **3.1.1.2. Behavioral Capacities: The Manifestation of a Differentiated Identity**

A differentiated cognitive identity is solidified in practice through a set of behavioral capacities that enable the person to respond to challenges not with emotional reactivity but with maturity, deliberation, and principled action.

#### **A) Emotional Self-Regulation (Self-Purification)**

The most important behavioral capacity that directly arises from separating reason and emotion is emotional self-regulation. Differentiation does not mean the absence of emotion but the ability to process reactions objectively so that one becomes free from automatic responses and gains the power of choice (Qarabaghi, 2017 AD/1396 SH: 87). In Qur'anic discourse, this skill falls under the comprehensive concept of purification and growth of the soul) (al-Shams: 9). It is an active process for managing impulses that, by reducing emotional reactivity, allows for mature action. The Qur'an provides clear practical strategies for emotion regulation:

- 1) **Managing anger:** Instead of suppressing anger or expressing it explosively, the Qur'an recommends the strategies of restraining anger and forgiveness for the God-conscious (Āli' Imrān: 134). This two-step process first contains the intense emotion and then, through a cognitive-spiritual act (forgiveness), prevents anger from turning into resentment.
- 2) **Managing fear and anxiety:** Maladaptive fears (such as fear of poverty, death, or an uncertain future) are regulated by strengthening faith in God's power and mercy. The Qur'an promises tranquility to the friends of God

(Yūnus: 62). This absence of fear, or "*Sakīnah*," (al-Faḥ : 4) is an inner calm independent of external events, enabling the individual to maintain rational thinking even in crises.

- 3) **Managing sorrow and joy:** To prevent emotional instability and mood swings in response to failure or success, the Qur'an establishes the principle of "Not grieving over what you lose and not exulting arrogantly in what you gain." (al-Ḥadīd: 23) This golden principle of emotional regulation frees the individual from being imprisoned by time and circumstances, giving them stability.

This self-regulation is the outcome of struggling against carnal desires and temptation (al-Jāthīyah: 23; al-Nās: 4), which are the primary sources of irrational decisions. Mastery over these forces is the practical embodiment of a differentiated self.

## **B) Patience and Resilience**

The second behavioral capacity is patience, an active strategy for managing adversity, controlling impulses, and persisting in one's goals, one that closely overlaps with the psychological construct of resilience. Patience strengthens differentiation in three dimensions:

### **1. Patience in the Face of Calamity**

This refers to rational functioning and maintaining psychological coherence during stressful events. The Qur'an considers this capacity to be the result of a form of cognitive reframing of crises (al-Baqarah: 156). By giving meaning to suffering, this perspective prevents the individual from destructive emotional reactions and from losing self-control.

### **2. Patience in Obedience**

This means perseverance in fulfilling duties that run contrary to the inclinations of the lower self. Such steadfastness strengthens the "Self" against the pull of immediate gratification and enables the individual to act according to their "I-position" and internal values rather than external pressures.

### **3. Patience in Avoiding Sin**

This refers to self-restraint and self-control in the face of temptations and the attractions of sin. It clearly reflects the dominance of the rational system over the emotional one and, by preventing impulsive decisions, represents a key indicator of emotional maturity.

Moreover, by introducing the concept of "*Muṣ ṁbarah*," (Āli' Imrān: 200) the Qur'an elevates resilience to a systemic level. *Muṣ ṁbarah*, or collective patience (Ṭ abāṭ abā' ī, 1996 AD/1417 AH: 4, 91), enables a system to confront crises in a mature and synergistic way rather than transmitting anxiety in a chain reaction.

### **C) Trust in God and Self-Confidence**

The third behavioral capacity is (Tawakkul) trust in God, an active psycho-spiritual process that differs fundamentally from abandoning responsibility (Makarem Shirazi, 1995 AD/1374 SH: 24, 240). Trust in God consists of a two-stage process: First, exerting all rational effort, and second, entrusting the final outcome to God in order to manage the anxiety caused by uncertainty. The Qur'an expresses this principle succinctly: "When you have resolved, then put your trust in God." (Āli' Imrān: 159)

Trust in God strengthens differentiation in three key ways:

#### **1. Reducing chronic anxiety:**

By shifting focus from obsessive control over outcomes to fulfilling one's duty, Trust in God reduces performance anxiety. The sense of sufficiency that arises from

trusting in God (al-Ṭ alāq: 3) removes the root of anxiety, feelings of loneliness and helplessness, and protects the individual from emotional reactivity.

### **2. Increasing self-confidence and confronting challenges:**

Relying on a firm and inexhaustible support increases a person's confidence when facing difficulties. This outlook redefines failure as part of the growth process and, rather than pushing the individual toward avoidant behaviors (such as emotional withdrawal), encourages active engagement with problems (cf. al-Tawbah: 52).

### **3. Strengthening individuality and independence:**

By reducing reliance on unstable human supports, trust in God frees individuals from anxiety-driven dependencies for security and approval. This emotional independence lays the groundwork for the development of a differentiated self that can establish healthy, non-dependent relationships while maintaining an inner and stable source of peace.

## **D) Remembrance (*Dhikr*) and Worship**

The fourth behavioral capacity consists of acts of worship centered on *Dhikr* (the conscious remembrance of God). These practices strengthen the cognitive and emotional processes required for achieving differentiation. Their multidimensional roles include:

### **1. Centering and creating inner tranquility:**

By focusing attention on a stable and enduring reality, *Dhikr* frees the mind from agitation and brings the heart to tranquility (al-Ra' d: 28). This calm directly reduces emotional reactivity and enhances the individual's capacity to manage environmental stress, contributing significantly to stabilizing the emotional climate.

### **2. Strengthening self-control and inhibition:**

Acts of worship function as practical exercises for strengthening willpower. Within the process of piety (Qur'anic differentiation), prayer restrains immoral behavior (al-

‘ Ankabūt: 45), and fasting cultivates conscious control over instincts (al-Baqarah: 183), thereby enabling the rational system to dominate the emotional and impulsive systems.

### **3. Regulating attachment and reducing fusion:**

Worship creates a deep and secure emotional relationship with God, helping to repair unresolved attachment needs. A person who fulfills their need for love and affirmation through this unconditional source becomes less prone to anxious dependence and fusion in human relationships, relating instead from a position of independence and inner richness.

### **4. Providing a structure for responsibility and individuality:**

With their regular and covenant-based structure (al-Baqarah: 40), acts of worship cultivate discipline and independent agency. Continued engagement in these conscious practices gradually differentiates the self from environmental pressures and grants it stability and identity. In this way, remembrance and worship function as powerful psychological tools for constructing a differentiated and self-regulating personality.

#### **3.1.2. Interpersonal Differentiation: The Structure of Balanced Relationships**

Once an individual attains cognitive–emotional integration and independence at the intrapersonal level, this differentiation manifests in the realm of interpersonal relationships as well. Differentiation at this level refers to the individual’s ability to balance the two fundamental forces of individuality and togetherness. A differentiated person can establish intimate, deep, and meaningful relationships with others, especially family members, without falling into either of the two primary dysfunctions of undifferentiated relationships: "Fusion, meaning the dissolution of

oneself into another and the loss of identity boundaries, or emotional cutoff, meaning the creation of excessive distance and denial of the need for intimacy."

The Qur'anic model establishes this delicate balance through two complementary and integrated strategies:

1. Presenting a pattern of assertive and effective communication that makes intimacy possible without fusion;
2. Explaining principles for regulating relational distance that prevent emotional cutoff.

### **3.1.2.1. The Assertive Communication Model: Intimacy without Fusion**

Rather than the fight-or-flight pattern that characterizes emotional and undifferentiated relationships (Qorbani, 2020 AD/1399 SH: 162), the Qur'an outlines a communication model based on assertiveness, mutual respect, and empathy. This model, rooted in concepts such as good companionship and interaction and living together in kindness and fairness (al-Baqarah: 82; al-Nisā' : 19; al-Nūr: 27; al-Mujādalah: 11, etc.), ensures intimacy without fusion.

#### **A) Authenticity and Congruence (*Birr* and *Qawl Sadīd*)**

The first principle of a healthy relationship is **authenticity**, meaning that harmony exists between a person's inner world (thoughts, feelings, and intentions) and their outward behavior (speech and actions) (Qorbani, 2020 AD/1399 SH: 171). In undifferentiated and fused relationships, individuals often present a "False Self" in order to avoid conflict and gain others' approval.

In contrast, the Qur'an calls believers to honesty and congruence. The Qur'anic concept of *Birr* (comprehensive righteousness and integrity) beautifully describes this authenticity. *Birr* is not merely performing a few good deeds; rather, it is a state in which a person's heartfelt beliefs correspond fully with their behavior across

various areas of life, including social relationships, arising from the individual's comprehensive sincerity in action (al-Baqarah: 177). This congruence prevents the development of hypocrisy and artificial politeness that poison relationships.

In the domain of speech, the Qur'an also calls believers to "*Qawl Sadīd*" (al-Aḥ zāb: 70), speech that is firm, sound, aligned with reality, and free from deviation (Ṭ abāṭ abā' ī, 1996 AD/1417 AH: 16, 347), and to avoid "*Qawl al-Zūr*" (false or deceptive speech) (al-Ḥajj: 30) (Qara'ati, 2009 AD/1388 SH: 6, 38). All of these elements contribute to forming authentic communication free from pretension. Such authenticity enables individuals to participate in relationships from their genuine "I-position."

### **B) Directness and Clarity (*Qawl Balīgh*)**

The second component of assertive communication is clarity and directness. This means expressing messages clearly, directly, and in a way that is easily understood, minimizing ambiguity and the possibility of multiple interpretations.

In fused relationships, individuals often communicate their messages indirectly, vaguely, or generally out of fear of conflict or rejection. This style of communication not only fails to solve problems but also increases misunderstanding and further complicates relationships (cf. Qorbani, 2020 AD/1399 SH: 190).

By contrast, the Qur'an emphasizes clear and precise communication. God describes His own speech as "Clear" (*mubīn*) (al-Mā'idah: 15) and commands the Prophet to address people with "*Qawl Balīgh*," eloquent, effective, and precise speech (al-Nisā' : 63). Believers are also warned against using ambiguous or double-meaning expressions (al-Baqarah: 104) so as to prevent misunderstanding and misinterpretation (Makarem Shirazi, 1995 AD/1374 SH: 1, 385). This highlights an important principle of communication: "The responsibility for choosing clear words lies with the speaker."

It should be noted that directness in communication does not mean aggression or disregard for others' feelings. Rather, it involves honestly and directly expressing one's needs, thoughts, and emotions within a framework of respect. This communication style greatly helps clarify personal boundaries. When individuals clearly express their expectations and limits, both they and the other party gain a more accurate understanding of the relationship (Qorbani, 2020 AD/1399 SH: 203). Such transparency prevents unspoken expectations and false assumptions, often the roots of emotional fusion, and creates the conditions for a mature, reality-based relationship.

### **C) Unconditional Respect**

The third pillar of the assertive communication model is unconditional respect. This principle means valuing the inherent humanity of the other person regardless of their behavior, beliefs, or performance. In undifferentiated relationships, respect is often conditional, "I respect you as long as you behave according to my expectations." This instrumental view makes relationships fragile and vulnerable. In contrast, the Qur'anic model emphasizes a fundamental and unconditional respect that remains even in situations of disagreement and conflict. This unconditional respect arises from several key Qur'anic concepts:

#### **1. The inherent dignity of the human being**

The Qur'an attributes an intrinsic dignity and honor to all human beings, regardless of religion, race, or gender:

"Indeed, We have honored the children of Adam." (al-Isrā' : 70)

This principle provides a universal foundation for respecting all people (Rahnama et al., 2013 AD/1392 SH: 30). It teaches that even if one disagrees with someone's behavior, one has no right to humiliate or disrespect their human essence.

This outlook reaches its peak in the Qur'anic description of the "Servants of the Most Merciful" ( *‘ Ibād al-Raḥ mān*); those who, when addressed harshly by the ignorant (stubborn individuals), do not retaliate but respond with dignity and words of peace, avoiding conflict (al-Furqān: 63). This behavior represents the highest form of differentiation in conflict management, characterized by the absence of emotional reactivity and the preservation of respect even in the face of disrespect.

## **2. Brotherhood in faith**

Within the circle of believers, this respect gains deeper meaning and commitment through the concept of brotherhood (al-Ḥujurāt: 10). This spiritual and moral bond obliges believers to go beyond mere legal rights and to conduct their relationships on the basis of compassion, reconciliation, and reform. This principle creates a powerful support network that prevents emotional disconnection when difficulties arise.

## **3. Forgiveness and gracious overlooking**

To manage human errors in relationships, the Qur'an introduces active cognitive-behavioral strategies rather than emotional reactions, embodied in the concepts of forgiveness and gracious overlooking. These concepts, often used together (al-Nūr: 22; al-Taghābun: 14), go beyond passive tolerance.

"*‘ Afw*" means forgiving and relinquishing one's right, while "*Ṣ afh* " represents a higher level: a noble turning away from the offense and completely overlooking it as if it had never occurred (Rāghib Iṣ fahānī, 1991 AD/1412 AH: 486). This process requires an advanced cognitive differentiation: "Separating the wrong action from the person who committed it." Such differentiation, considered a hallmark of the pious (*Muttaqīn*) and the virtuous (*Muḥ sinīn*) (Āli<sup>‘</sup> Imrān: 134), prevents labeling and sweeping judgments that erode relationships.

The skill of *Taghāful* (deliberately overlooking minor faults) can be regarded as the practical expression of *Ṣ afh* . By employing this skill, a differentiated person avoids

emotional reactivity, prevents the escalation of minor conflicts, and, while preserving the dignity of the other, prioritizes the long-term cohesion and stability of the relationship over immediate vindication of personal rights. This conscious choice is an effective strategy for maintaining balance within relational systems and preventing emotional ruptures.

#### **4. Self-governance (rejection of controlling others)**

Unconditional respect requires recognizing the independence and freedom of the other in interactions. The Qur'an rejects any form of coercion in imposing beliefs (al-Ghāshīyah: 21-22; Qāf: 45) or compelling religious acceptance (al-Baqarah: 256), and it emphasizes each individual's personal responsibility for their own choices (al-Kāfirūn: 6). In doing so, it presents a model of relationship in which control and coercion have no place (Ṭ abāṭ abā' ī, 1996 AD/1417 AH: 2, 343).

A differentiated individual, instead of attempting to control others, focuses on presenting their own perspective clearly and respectfully while leaving the final choice to the other person. Altogether, these principles create a climate of psychological safety and respect in which individuals can be their authentic selves without fear of judgment or humiliation, while managing disagreements and conflicts in a constructive and mature manner.

#### **D) Understanding and Empathy**

The fourth component of the assertive communication model is understanding and empathy. Empathy is the ability to temporarily enter another person's world, understand their thoughts and feelings from their own perspective, and communicate this understanding to them (Rogers, 1980: 234).

This skill is fundamentally different from fusion (losing oneself in another's emotions and identity). An empathic person travels into the other's inner world while

remaining aware that it is their world and ultimately returns to their own independent standpoint.

The Qur'an, by emphasizing concepts such as attentive listening and "Arguing in the best manner," offers practical guidelines for realizing such empathic understanding.

1. *Istimāʿ* (active and deep listening): The first step toward empathy is listening well. The Qur'an distinguishes between *Samʿ* (mere hearing) and *Istimāʿ* (active listening, with the intention of understanding and acceptance) (Ṭ abāṭ abā' ī, 1996 AD/1417 AH: 9, 42). The *Ulu al-Albāb* (those endowed with understanding in the Qur'anic sense) are described as people who listen to speech and follow the best of it (al-Zumar: 18). This verse shows that they first listen to all statements without judgment or prejudice (the process of understanding), and then, through the power of their rationality and discernment (*Furqān*), choose the best (the process of analysis and selection). The art of good listening also highlighted in the conduct of the Noble Prophet (PBUH) (al-Tawbah: 61), is the primary prerequisite for entering another person's world.
2. *Jidāl Aḥ san* (empathetic and truth-oriented dialogue): The Holy Qur'an presents a sublime model for dialogue with opponents: "And argue with them in the best manner." (al-Naḥ l: 125) *Jidāl Aḥ san* is not a debate aimed at defeating the opponent at any cost; rather, it is a joint dialogue for discovering the truth. This model demonstrates a fully empathetic and differentiated interaction in which the aim is to establish the truth, not to humiliate the other party. This manner of dialogue avoids any form of insult, mockery, or provocation of obstinacy (cf. Ṭ abāṭ abā' ī, 1996 AD/1417 AH: 12, 373) and is grounded in fairness that even acknowledges the strengths of the opposing viewpoint (al-Baqarah: 219). The peak of this model is responding to evil with

goodness so that a hostile emotional atmosphere may be transformed into a friendly space based on mutual understanding (al-Fuṣṣilat: 34).

This communication pattern enables a person, while remaining steadfast in their own "I-position" and principles, to approach the understanding of the other's viewpoint with openness and curiosity. This process not only increases the likelihood of constructive conflict resolution, but also prevents emotional fusion by demonstrating that one can understand another without necessarily agreeing with them. Instead of retreating into a defensive shell out of fear of change, the differentiated individual enters dialogue with cognitive courage, and this represents the height of strength and health of an independent self. This model is manifested in the practical conduct of the impeccable Imams (AS), such as in the debates of Imam *Riḍā* (AS), who, despite profound doctrinal differences, observed the utmost respect and fairness in dialogue.

### **3.1.2.2. Regulating Distance: Avoiding Emotional Cutoff while Maintaining Boundaries**

The second principal strategy of the Qur'anic model for achieving interpersonal differentiation is the conscious and purposeful regulation of distance in relationships. A healthy family system is one in which members are neither so entangled that they lose their individuality (fusion) nor so distant that the sense of belonging and intimacy disappears (emotional cutoff). The Qur'anic model manages the balance between individuality and togetherness through two complementary principles:

#### **A) *Ṣilah al-Raḥim*: The Qur'anic strategy for confronting emotional cutoff**

Emotional cutoff is the defensive mechanism of undifferentiated individuals who, in order to escape the intense anxiety of fused relationships; separate themselves

physically or emotionally from their family of origin (Bowen, 1978: 185). This is a false independence rooted in fear and unresolved dependence. In direct contrast to this approach, the Holy Qur'an places great emphasis on maintaining ties with close relatives and commands believers to preserve and strengthen family relationships. *Ṣ ilah al-Raḥ im* is one of the prominent characteristics of the *Ulū al-Albāb*, who remain faithful to what God has commanded to be joined (al-Ra' d: 21), whereas severing kinship ties is counted among the traits of the wicked and the losers (al-Baqarah: 27; Muḥ ammad: 22-23).

This emphasis carries a profound psychological message: escaping from relational problems is not a solution. The believer is obligated to remain within the arena of family relationships, to confront tensions and conflicts in a mature manner (based on the model of assertive communication), and to avoid severing ties. This directive compels the individual, instead of adopting an avoidant reaction, to strive for emotional growth and maturity within the very relationships that are challenging.

By prohibiting emotional cutoff, *Ṣ ilah al-Raḥ im* creates the ground for genuine and healthy differentiation, a differentiation that is realized in connection with others, not in escape from them. This approach is recommended even more actively in the hadith tradition, where maintaining ties with a relative who has severed the relationship is encouraged: "Maintain relations with the one who has cut you off." (Majlisī, 1982 AD/1403 AH: 68, 423) This instruction reflects the height of mature agency in contrast to emotional reactivity within the family system.

### **B) Ḥudūd Allāh: Value boundaries for confronting fusion**

While *Ṣ ilah al-Raḥ im* emphasizes preserving connection, the second principle, *Ḥudūd Allāh*, establishes boundaries that prevent this connection from turning into fusion and unhealthy enmeshment. *Ḥudūd Allāh* refers to the non-negotiable

principles, laws, and values that form the core structure of an individual's religious and moral identity (cf. Ṭ abāṭ abā' ī, 1996 AD/1417 AH: 2, 233).

The Qur'an explicitly states that emotional and familial bonds, however strong they may be, cannot violate these value boundaries. Verse 22 of Surah *al-Mujādilah* clearly delineates a non-negotiable identity boundary and states that in the case of conflict between the closest family members (father, child, and spouse) and adherence to the principles of faith, absolute priority belongs to preserving the *Ḥudūd Allāh*. Likewise, in verses 23-24 of Surah *al-Tawbah*, love for close relatives, if it becomes an obstacle to striving (*Jihād*) and moving along the divine path, is strongly condemned, indicating that familial attachments must not become a form of fusion or an impediment to the realization of higher values (Qara'ati, ٢٠٠٩ AD/1388 SH: 3, 399).

The principle of *Ḥudūd Allāh* creates a very clear and powerful psychological boundary for the individual. One learns that it is possible to love one's parents and show them kindness, yet if they invite one to oppose divine principles and limits, one must not obey them (Luqmān: 15; see also al-' Ankabūt: 8). This type of interaction depicts the pinnacle of the Qur'anic model of differentiation, which includes a complete distinction between "Behavior" and "Relationship." A person may reject a particular behavior without severing the entire relationship. While maintaining one's identity and value boundaries (negation of fusion), the individual remains committed to preserving a respectful and humane relationship (negation of emotional cutoff). This capacity to say "No" to a behavior while saying "Yes" to the relationship represents the highest level of emotional maturity and differentiation.

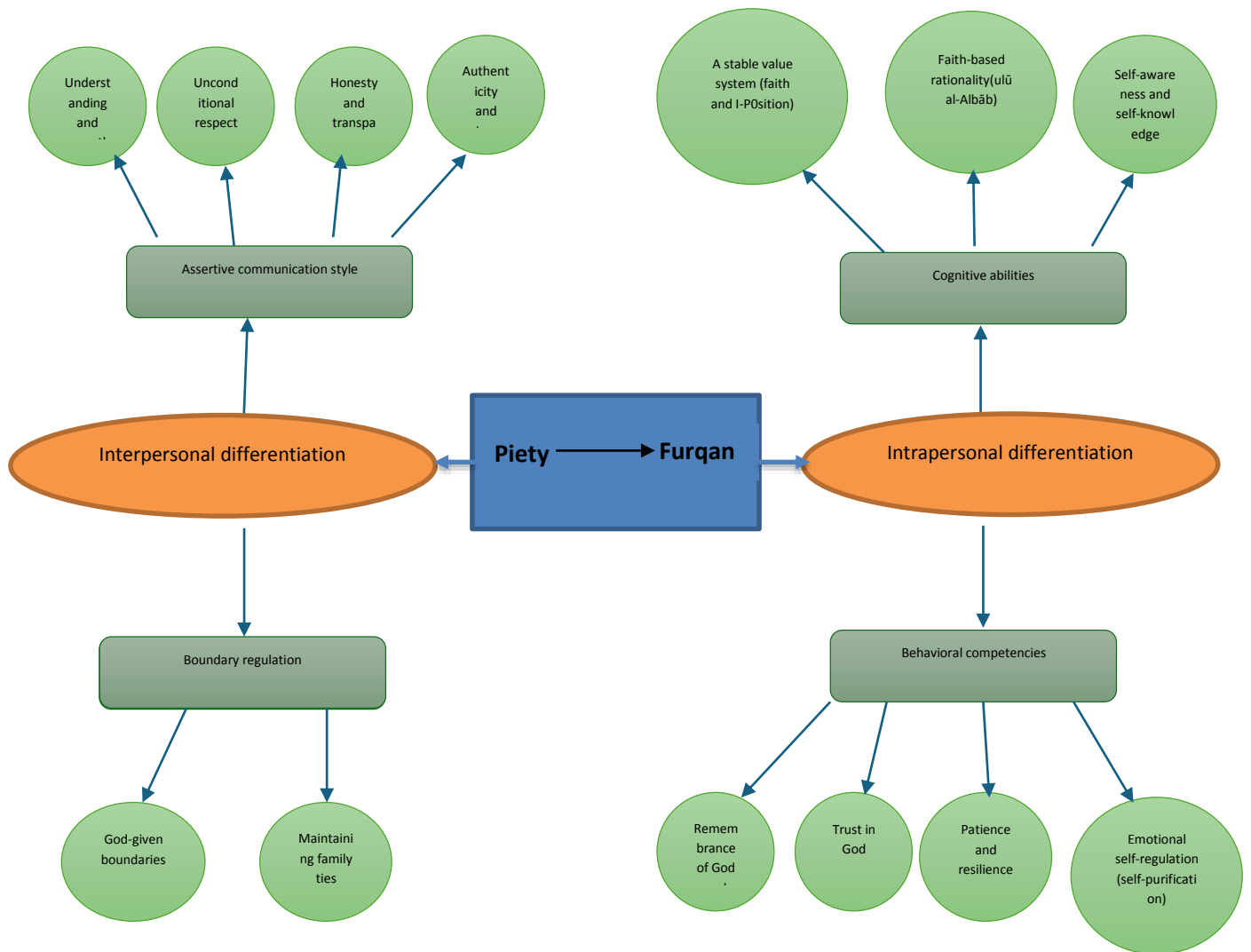


Figure 1 - Final Model and Theme Network based on the Content Analysis of the Holy Qur'an

## Discussion and Conclusion

This research was conducted with the aim of extracting and formulating the model of differentiation from the perspective of the Holy Qur'an. The findings indicate that

the model extracted from the Qur'an, while aligning with the underlying principles of Bowen's theory in explaining the mechanisms of mental health, enhances its framework by adding spiritual dimensions. A comparative analysis reveals that although both models share common ground in fundamental principles such as "Differentiation of intellect from emotion," "Reduction of reactivity," and the pathology of the two extreme states of "Fusion" and "Emotional cutoff," they possess deep differences in their foundations and outcomes. Unlike Bowen's theory, which posits "Mental health" and "Anxiety reduction" as the ultimate goals of growth, the Qur'anic model formulates differentiation within the process of piety and as a product of *Furqān*, with the ultimate aim being "Spiritual perfection" and "Divine proximity."

This shift in the ultimate goal brings about a fundamental transformation in the other components of the model. Firstly, the source of change power is altered. While Bowen relies on the individual's cognitive efforts, the Qur'anic model, in addition to that, emphasizes the inexhaustible spiritual source of power, namely, "Seeking help from God" through faith and trust in God. Secondly, the definition of boundaries changes; the personal and fluid boundaries in Bowen's model give way to a universal, objective, and stable value system under the title of God-given boundaries, which provides the individual with clarity, stability, and direction.

In explaining the relationship between the model of the "Differentiated person" and the pinnacle of Qur'anic anthropology, the "Perfect human" (the station of vicegerent of God), the central finding of this research must be emphasized: that differentiation is formulated under the concept of piety. In the logic of the Qur'an, piety (self-regulation and control of desires) is the "Provisions" and a fundamental condition for movement on the path of perfection (al-Baqarah: 197). The differentiated person, by attaining the virtue of piety, achieves existential independence and mental health, which is a "Necessary Prelude" to reaching the

station of the "Perfect Qur'anic Human," that is, a human in whom all human values have harmoniously grown and reached their utmost degree (Motahhari, 1988 AD/1367 SH: 20).

In an analytical summary, the distinguishing features and innovations of the Qur'anic model can be explained through four interconnected components:

- First, the comprehensiveness of this model, which offers an integrated view of the human being by simultaneously addressing cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and spiritual dimensions;
- Second, its divine foundation, which, unlike human models based on relative values, is rooted in revelation;
- Third, its operability, which provides practical tools for self-cultivation through specific solutions such as patience, trust in God, and acts of worship. Fourth, its transcendent purposefulness, which elevates the path of growth beyond the level of mental health, bestowing eternal meaning upon life.

Ultimately, the "Differentiated Qur'anic person" is defined as an individual who, by virtue of a vertical and secure connection with God, is capable of achieving simultaneous independence, responsibility, and intimacy at the horizontal level (relationships with self and others). He is neither an isolated and disconnected individual nor a dependent and fused one; rather, he is an independent member connected to the human systems around him. The main innovation of this research lies in moving beyond superficial comparisons to formulate an indigenous, coherent, and operational model rooted in the deepest epistemological layers of the Holy Qur'an.

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