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Research Article

Inherited in the Ring: Multigenerational Family Anxiety in The Iron Claw through Bowen Family Systems Theory

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Abstract *The Iron Claw* has been examined through masculinity, parental expectations, patriarchal authority, and disciplinary power, leaving less attention to how anxiety operates relationally across family generations. This study examines the film through Bowen Family Systems Theory using a theory-informed qualitative audiovisual analysis. The films served as the primary corpus; English subtitles indexed dialogue and timestamps, while Indonesian hard subtitles provided a supplementary cross-check. Analysis proceeds through theory-blind extraction of 43 provisional Relational Episodes, followed by high-threshold screening against eight Bowen concepts, alternative-explanation testing, negative-case analysis, and audiovisual verification. Four higher-order findings emerged. First, family anxiety is organized through a performance-based logic linking strength, success, ranking, and emotional restraint. Second, anxiety is redistributed through sibling comparison, role replacement, and shifting relational positions, while these pressures coexist with strong sibling attachment. Third, Kevin's movement toward Differentiation of Self is represented as uneven, combining increasingly self-defined family commitments with periods of anxiety-driven reactivity. Fourth, multigenerational transmission appears not as deterministic repetition but as continuity of emotional rules that can be modified through different relational responses. Five Bowen concepts received sufficient support: Nuclear Family Emotional Process, Family Projection Process, Triangles, Differentiation of Self, and Multigenerational Transmission Process. The study argues that The Iron Claw represents multigenerational family anxiety as a relational pattern whose recurrence remains possible but whose form is not fixed, extending existing readings beyond individual pathology and vertical patriarchal domination toward the circulation and modification of anxiety within a family emotional system.

Keywords**:** Bowen Family Systems Theory; The Iron Claw; family anxiety; multigenerational transmission; differentiation of self; family emotional system; qualitative audiovisual analysis

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1. Introduction

The family is a primary relational space where individuals learn about closeness, acceptance, responsibility, conflict, and how to respond to stress. Therefore, tension within the family cannot always be understood as a psychological experience isolated to one member. From a systemic perspective, changes in one member's functioning can influence the responses of others, while repeated patterns of interaction can maintain, focus, or redirect anxiety within the network of family relationships. Bowen's Family Systems Theory (BFST) specifically views the family as an interdependent emotional system, with chronic anxiety as a force that can increase emotional reactivity, dependence on approval, conflict, distancing, and focused attention on specific members (Bowen, 1978; Brown, 1999; Kerr & Bowen, 1988; Papero, 2014). Empirical reviews provide broad support for Differentiation of Self as a relational construct, while pointing out that not all of Bowen's propositions have equal support and therefore require selective interpretation (Calatrava et al., 2022; Miller et al., 2004).

The representation of this process becomes relevant in The Iron Claw, a film that constructs the story of the Von Erich family within the world of American professional wrestling. Although it can be positioned as a sports biopic, the film's emotional structure centers on father-son and sibling relationships, the demands of achievement, masculine toughness, family loyalty, loss, and the struggle to maintain a family under increasing pressure. Wrestling functions not only as a sporting arena, but also as a space where values about strength, success, vulnerability, and family expectations are demonstrated, compared, and negotiated. Durkin himself emphasizes the importance of grief, emotional suppression, masculinity, and a generational mindset in how the film constructs this family. This focus makes The Iron Claw relevant to read not only as a story of profession and tragedy, but also as a representation of how a family organizes itself when facing recurring threats.

Studies on The Iron Claw have begun to develop through several channels. (Auzan, 2024) examines the construction of various types of masculinity in the characters through the film's scenes and dialogue. (Mirza, 2024), in a professional commentary in Psychiatric News, highlights parental expectations, toxic masculinity, competition for paternal recognition, and the brothers' difficulties processing loss. The most direct and recent study by (Muharamah & Afifulloh, 2026) uses Foucauldian Discourse Analysis to explain how patriarchal authority, disciplinary power, the commodification of the body, masculinity, achievement, family loyalty, and continuous competition shape Fritz's relationship with his children. The study also reads Kevin's transformation as a form of resistance to inherited patriarchal values.

This literature provides an important foundation for understanding the content and direction of stress in the Von Erich family. However, knowing that Fritz had authority over the children is different from explaining what happened once that stress entered the family's emotional field. Paternal evaluation can alter sibling relationships; one sibling's opportunities can displace another sibling; loss can result in role reallocation; and anxiety associated with the family of origin can continue to influence relationships when Kevin later builds a family with Pam and the children. Therefore, there is still analytical room to shift the focus from questions of who has power to questions of how the family's emotional system organizes itself under sustained anxiety.

BFST provides conceptual tools for this shift. Concepts such as the Nuclear Family Emotional Process, Family Projection Process, Triangles, Differentiation of Self, and Multigenerational Transmission Process allow analysis to move from personal traits to relational mechanisms. Differentiation of Self, for example, is not synonymous with independence, rebellion, or emotional detachment, but rather relates to the ability to maintain one's self-position under relational pressure without fully complying with group demands or reactively severing connections (Brown & Errington, 2024). Similarly, multigenerational transmission is not understood as biological inheritance or deterministic transmission of trauma, but rather as the possibility of continuity in emotional rules and patterns of relational functioning across generational positions (Józefczyk, 2023).

Applying theories derived from the family therapy tradition to fictional works requires caution. Film characters are not clinical patients, and cinematic representations do not provide the kind of evidence necessary to establish a psychological diagnosis or stable levels of differentiation. Bowen's theory has been applied to works of fiction and film, including Tennessee Williams's plays, the films "Yol Ayrımı," and the novel "For One More Day" (Alzoubi, 2018; Gültekin Arayıcı & Tekinsav Sütcü, 2023; Tan & Amran, 2024). These precedents demonstrate that fictional family systems can be analyzed Bowenianly, but they also demonstrate the importance of selecting concepts based on data support, rather than treating Bowen's eight concepts as a checklist.

Based on this, this study makes two contributions. Theoretically, it shifts the reading of The Iron Claw from individual domination and patriarchal authority to the relational circulation of anxiety within the family emotional system. This perspective does not replace the reading of masculinity or Foucauldian power, but rather explains how the tensions identified by previous studies move through comparison, role allocation, emotional reactivity, and intergenerational relationships. Methodologically, the study separates theory-blind relational extraction from subsequent Bowen screening, then uses high-threshold coding, alternative-explanation testing, negative-case analysis, and audiovisual verification to reduce the risk of confirmation bias.

This study aims to analyze how The Iron Claw represents family anxiety as a relational and multigenerational process through Bowen's Family Systems Theory. The focus is not to determine whether the Von Erich family is clinically "dysfunctional," but rather to identify how the film constructs emotional interdependence, how tension is organized and transferred through relationships, and how these patterns persist or change as generational positions shift. Based on this aim, the study poses three questions:

RQ1. How does The Iron Claw represent chronic family anxiety as a relational process within the Von Erich family emotional system?

RQ2. Through which data-supported concepts and relational processes of Bowen Family Systems Theory is family anxiety organized and transmitted within and across generations in the film?

RQ3. How does the film represent continuity, modification, or discontinuity in these family emotional patterns across generations?

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1. Family as an Emotional System: Chronic Anxiety and Relational Interdependence

Bowen Family Systems Theory starts from the assumption that families cannot be understood simply as collections of individuals with separate psychological characteristics. (Bowen, 1978) and (Kerr & Bowen, 1988) view families as emotional systems whose members influence each other through patterns of closeness, reactivity, conflict, expectation, distancing, and adaptation. (Brown, 1999) emphasizes that relational interdependence is one of the foundations that distinguishes Bowen theory from approaches that focus on individual pathology, while (Papero, 2014) shows that the two-person relational unit still functions as part of a broader system and is influenced by anxiety and emotional reactivity. (Brown & Errington, 2024) update this reading by emphasizing that Differentiation of Self relates to the capacity to maintain individuality while remaining in meaningful emotional contact with others.

One of the forces driving the family emotional system is chronic anxiety. Unlike acute anxiety, which arises in response to immediate and temporary threats, chronic anxiety develops through relational sensitivity that can persist over time. As tensions increase, family members can become more reactive to approval, rejection, perceived failure, vulnerability, and changes in the functioning of other members. Under these conditions, families can respond through conflict, emotional distance, focused concern, or reciprocal patterns of overfunctioning and underfunctioning. The Nuclear Family Emotional Process explains how anxiety can be organized within a family generation, while other Bowen concepts help explain how tension is transferred, concentrated, or maintained through relationships.

Family systems' responses to stress are also not always reducible to individual symptoms. (Papero, 2017) suggests that severe and chronic stress need to be understood within the context of overall family functioning, as changes in one part of the system can result in adjustments in other relationships. (Papero, 2024) further positions the family emotional system as a way to understand how individuality and togetherness continually negotiate when anxiety increases. This perspective supports the use of BFST in this study to understand how threat, performance pressure, and loss alter relational functioning without assuming that each distress is an individual diagnosis.

The empirical basis for BFST is not uniform. (Miller et al., 2004) found relatively consistent support for the relationship between differentiation, chronic anxiety, marital satisfaction, and psychological distress, but found more limited support for several other propositions, particularly Sibling Position and several hypotheses regarding triangulation. (Dolz-del-Castellar & Oliver, 2021) also found that family functioning correlated positively with Differentiation of Self and negatively with trait anxiety. These findings reinforce the premise that individual emotional functioning can be better understood when placed in a relational context, but also caution that Bowen's concepts should be selected based on evidence, not used as a theoretical package from which all components must emerge.

Thus, chronic anxiety in this study is not used as a diagnosis of a specific character. The concept serves as a lens for understanding heightened relational sensitivity and how the family system organizes responses to threat, loss, achievement, approval, and vulnerability. The

focus of the analysis therefore shifts from the question of "who experiences anxiety?" to the question of "how does anxiety alter the functioning of relationships among family members?"

2.2. Differentiation, Projection, and Triangular Regulation under Family Pressure

Among the BFST concepts, Differentiation of Self is the one that has received the most empirical attention. Bowen uses this concept to explain a person's capacity to balance emotional and intellectual functioning while maintaining connection and autonomy within relationships. Therefore, differentiation is not synonymous with emotional detachment, rebellion, or physical independence. A more differentiated individual is not someone who does not need family, but someone who is relatively able to maintain a self-position when facing relational pressure without being completely overcome by emotional reactivity.

Efforts to operationalize this concept developed through the Differentiation of Self Inventory introduced by (Skowron & Friedlander, 1998), which encompasses emotional reactivity, emotional cutoff, fusion, and the ability to maintain an I-position in significant relationships. (Skowron & Schmitt, 2003) later strengthened the Fusion with Others measure and demonstrated its link to insecurity in adult attachment. (Drake et al., 2015) developed a short form of the DSI, while (Calatrava et al., 2022), through a scoping review of hundreds of studies, demonstrated broad support for the relationship between differentiation and psychological health, marital quality, physical health, and intergenerational relationships. (Piteo & MacKay, 2021) also demonstrated the relevance of differentiation to mental health in emerging adults.

Cross-cultural findings demonstrate that the concept is not limited to the North American family therapy context. (Kim et al., 2014) found a relationship between Differentiation of Self and family functioning in South Korean participants, while (Lee & Johnson, 2017) discussed differentiation in Asian-American immigrants. In the Indonesian context, (Aditya et al., 2022) used differentiation to explain mental health during the pandemic; (Siregar & Aditya, 2024) found its contribution to relationship satisfaction; and (Claudia et al., 2025) linked helicopter parenting to Differentiation of Self in Indonesian emerging adults. This literature reinforces the relevance of differentiation as a relational construct, while also cautioning that interpretation should not lead to assigning clinical scores to film characters.

When anxiety increases, family pressure can be concentrated through the Family Projection Process. This concept explains how parental anxiety or concern becomes focused attention on a child, influencing how parents interpret the child's functioning and how the child adjusts to those expectations. However, parental pressure alone is not enough to prove projection. A relational chain consisting of parental concern, selective focus, interpretation or corrective response, and changes in the child's functioning are required. (Dumont, 2021), for example, uses Bowen to interpret helicopter parenting as a form of hyperattentive parenting that can function through the Family Projection Process when parental anxiety is focused on the child's functioning.

Triangles explain another mechanism through which anxiety can be regulated. A triangle is not simply a three-person interaction. In the Bowenian sense, a triangle is relevant when tension in the dyad attracts a third party so that anxiety can be diverted, stabilized, or reorganized. (Murdock et al., 2023) demonstrated the complex relationship between anxiety, triangling, differentiation, and distress, so the presence of three parties does not automatically constitute a triangle. In this study, Triangles are treated as a mechanism-specific concept and are only accepted if dyadic tension, third-party involvement, and changes in tension distribution can be observed.

In addition to quantitative approaches, Bowen-oriented assessment has also evolved into qualitative family-systems analysis. (Wilt, 2023) developed the Differentiation of Family Systems Inventory as a qualitative intervention and evaluation tool that places relationship processes and family functioning as objects of systemic observation. This study did not adopt this instrument, but its presence supports qualitative attention to relational patterns, not just individual scores.

2.3. Multigenerational Transmission: Continuity without Determinism

The Multigenerational Transmission Process explains the possibility of continuity in emotional functioning, relational sensitivities, expectations, and differentiation from one

generational position to the next. However, transmission in BFST is not synonymous with biological inheritance and should not be simplified to the idea that parental trauma is automatically passed on to children.

(Józefczyk, 2023) shows that empirical research on the multigenerational transmission of differentiation yields complex results and is heavily influenced by how transmission is operationalized. (Calatrava et al., 2022) also position intergenerational transmission as an area that still requires more longitudinal and causal research. Therefore, similarities in parent and child behavior alone are not sufficient to conclude a multigenerational transmission process.

In the analysis of fictional works, this caution is even more crucial. Filmmakers can create parallel scenes and generational contrasts for narrative purposes. These parallels remain valid data for the analysis of cinematic representation, but claims should be limited to how the film constructs continuity or change, not to the psychological transmission assumed to actually occur in historical families.

Transmission also doesn't necessarily result in exact repetition. Patterns can reappear but elicit different responses in subsequent relational environments. A person may carry emotional rules from their family of origin, while their spouse or children may respond to those rules differently, resulting in the pattern being modified. Therefore, this study positions continuity, modification, and discontinuity as open analytical possibilities. The term multigenerational family anxiety is used as a descriptive focus on how emotional rules and relational responses to stress emerge across different generational configurations, not as a ninth concept outside of Bowen's theory.

An important implication of this position is that transmission needs to be read as a process dependent on relationship context. The continuity of an emotional rule does not automatically mean that it has the same function, intensity, or outcome in subsequent generations. Bowenian transmission becomes more analytical when attention is directed to how a pattern recurs, who responds to it, and whether the relational environment maintains or changes the pattern. Thus, strong multigenerational evidence requires more than just parallel behavior: it requires continuity of relational meaning as well as the mechanisms connecting generational positions. This standard also prevents this study from interpreting every similarity between Fritz and Kevin as transmission. Only patterns that demonstrate recurring emotional rules, changes in generational positions, and comparable relational responses are retained as evidence of MTP.

2.4. Bowen Family Systems Theory beyond Clinical Settings

Although BFST developed from clinical family research and family therapy, this theory has been used as an interpretive framework for fictional family systems. (Alzoubi, 2018) applied Bowen's concepts related to the Nuclear Family Emotional Process and the Family Projection Process to analyze family dynamics in Tennessee Williams' play Period of Adjustment. (Gültekin Arayıcı & Tekinsav Sütcü, 2023) applied BFST concepts to the film Yol Ayrımı, while Tan and Amran (2024) analyzed For One More Day by selecting Triangles, Family Projection Process, and Emotional Cutoff according to the dynamics they considered most relevant.

This precedent demonstrates that film and literature can provide recurring representations of interaction, conflict, attachment, family roles, and emotional responses that allow for relational mechanisms to be analyzed. However, applying BFST to fictional works still runs the risk of conceptual overreach when characters are treated as clinical subjects or when all of Bowen's concepts are forced to be "discovered."

This study takes a more restrictive approach. The BFST is not used as a checklist and is not used when relational episodes are first extracted. The audiovisual data first determines which interactions are relevant before theory is used to test mechanisms. The success of the analysis is therefore determined not by the number of Bowen concepts recovered, but by the ability of the retained concepts to explain the relational process more specifically than alternative explanations.

2.5. The Iron Claw: Masculinity, Power, and the Underexamined Family Emotional System

Existing readings of The Iron Claw have emphasized masculinity, parental expectations, and patriarchal discipline. (Mirza, 2024) highlights parental expectations and toxic masculinity,

while (Auzan, 2024) examines the construction of masculinity in the film's characters. More systematically, (Muharamah & Afifulloh, 2026) show how patriarchal authority, bodily discipline, achievement, and family loyalty operate through Foucauldian configurations of power.

Collectively, these readings illuminate the ideological content and vertical direction of stress within the Von Erich family, but pay limited attention to how this stress subsequently circulates through sibling comparison, role redistribution, emotional reactivity, and intergenerational relationships. BFST therefore complements, rather than replaces, previous approaches by shifting attention from the source of stress to the relational organization of anxiety within the family emotional system.

3. Method

3.1. Research Design and Analytical Framework

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design with a theory-informed qualitative audiovisual analysis approach. Films are treated as audiovisual texts that construct meaning through a combination of narrative form, mise-en-scène, cinematography, editing, performance, and sound, not through dialogue alone (Bordwell et al., 2024). The visual approach also demands attention to how meaning is produced through visual material and the context of its interpretation, so verbal transcripts cannot be treated as a substitute for the entire audiovisual evidence (Rose, 2022).

BFST is used as a relational-systemic interpretive framework, not as a clinical diagnostic instrument. The framework focuses on emotional interdependence, chronic anxiety, regulation of relational tension, focused concern, self-position under family stress, and the possibility of continuity in emotional functioning between generations. The unit of analysis is defined as a Relational Episode/Sequence (RE), a narratively delimited audiovisual sequence in which tension, expectation, alignment, distancing, support, conflict, or emotional response between two or more family members can be observed. One RE can include several subtitle entries and several shots as long as it represents a coherent relational process.

3.2. Data Source and Corpus Preparation

The primary data source is the film The Iron Claw. The film, not the historical account of the Von Erich family, is treated as the source of truth for analytical claims. This distinction is important because the film is a dramatized representation that engages in narrative selection, compression, and adaptation of historical events. Therefore, external information about the Von Erich family is not used to fill in relational events not represented in the film.

English subtitles were used as an indexing aid to locate dialogue and timestamps. The subtitle file contains 1,903 entries. Subtitles were not used as a substitute for audiovisual evidence because the meaning of an interaction can change based on the speaker, addressee, tone, gesture, physical positioning, reaction shots, or the context before and after the dialogue. The Indonesian hard subtitles attached to the audiovisual files were used only as a supplementary cross-check when necessary and were not treated as a stand-alone source of analysis.

Corpus preparation was conducted by screening the entire film. To aid temporal navigation, the film was divided into 11 operational macro-blocks based on key narrative phase changes. Macro-blocks are not formal chapters of the film, but rather corpus organizational devices. The initial screening yielded 43 provisional relational episodes and 7 contextual/narrative anchors. Contextual anchors include voice-overs, major narrative events, or symbolic sequences that are important for the context but do not automatically qualify as relational evidence.

The core characters in the family system include Fritz, Doris, Kevin, David, Kerry, and Mike. Pam and Kevin's children are included when their interactions are relevant to examining Kevin's changing functioning between his family of origin and the family subsystem he later developed. Characters outside the family are only considered when they directly influence the relational processes being analyzed.

3.3. Data Analysis Procedure

The analysis was conducted in two main stages to reduce confirmation bias. In Pass A, candidate relational episodes were extracted theory-blind, so Bowen codes were not used. Each episode was recorded based on its timestamp, setting, participants, focal relationship, preceding context, dialogue cue, observable action, audiovisual evidence, relational tension, response, immediate consequence, and recurrence. Coding and analytic memoing were used to move from descriptive observations to pattern recognition, as recommended in qualitative coding (Saldaña, 2021).

The choice of relational sequences as the unit of analysis aligns with Bowen-oriented sequence analysis. (Errington, 2022) suggests that emotional processes in relationship interactions can be traced through sequences because relational meaning often lies in the sequence of actions and responses and changes in interactions, rather than in a single, isolated utterance. This study does not adopt Errington's procedure directly, but uses a similar principle that relational meaning needs to be examined sequentially and contextually.

In Pass B, 43 provisional REs were screened using eight BFST concepts as candidate analytical categories: Differentiation of Self, Triangles, Nuclear Family Emotional Process, Family Projection Process, Multigenerational Transmission Process, Emotional Cutoff, Sibling Position, and Societal Emotional Process. A Bowen code was only retained if it met three criteria: (1) relational evidence, that is, the data showed an interactional process and not just an individual emotional state; (2) concept-specific mechanism, that is, the episode fulfilled a mechanism that differentiated the concept from other Bowen concepts or general explanations; and (3) contextual support, that is, the dialogue and audiovisual context together supported the interpretation. For claims at the family-pattern level, recurrence in more than one narratively separated episode or one extended sequence with very strong evidence was required.

Each candidate is given an Accept, Hold, or Reject decision. Accept is given if the defining mechanism is met and alternative explanations are not stronger; Hold is used when some evidence is available but not yet sufficient; and Reject is used when the episode is more parsimoniously explained by another mechanism. Each Accept candidate also undergoes an alternative-explanation test by comparing Bowen's reading against possible explanations such as masculinity ideology, patriarchal parenting, professional wrestling pressure, grief, trauma-related interpretation, economic motivation, individual ambition, ordinary interpersonal conflict, and narrative convention.

After screening, accepted episodes were compared across episodes to identify recurrence, variation, contradiction, and higher-order patterns. This process utilized the principle of thematic pattern construction as a synthesis tool, not as a claim that the study fully followed Reflexive Thematic Analysis. (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021, 2022) used this to support pattern construction and methodological coherence between research questions, theoretical assumptions, coding practices, and claims.

3.4. Analytical Rigor and Ethical Boundaries

Analytical rigor is maintained through audiovisual verification, retention of held and rejected cases, recurrence checking, alternative-explanation testing, and negative-case analysis. Each episode serving as core evidence is examined within a context window that includes the interaction before the focal dialogue, the focal action or utterance, and the response afterward. Verification ensures not only wording and speaker but also relevant addressee, tone, silence, gesture, blocking, and reaction.

Negative-case analysis was used to identify episodes that contradicted the emerging interpretation. Evidence of sibling comparison or competition was compared with episodes of support, affection, protection, and relational repair. Kevin's self-positional change was also not assumed to be linear; episodes where he again exhibited anxiety-driven reactivity were retained as counter-evidence. This principle supports auditability and trustworthiness in qualitative analysis (Nowell et al., 2017), while (Braun & Clarke, 2021) advocate the importance of methodological coherence over the use of inappropriate universal quality criteria.

All coding decisions are maintained in an analytical audit trail that records the episode, candidate concept, mechanism, alternative explanation, counterevidence, recurrence, Accept/Hold/Reject decision, and confidence level. This audit trail serves as an internal

consistency tool: similar episodes should meet the same conceptual threshold, while changes in decision should be traceable to additional evidence or a stronger alternative explanation. Thus, the final interpretation depends not only on examples supporting the argument but also on documentation of why certain evidence was retained, retained, or rejected.

The rigor of this study was not based on intercoder agreement because it did not use a coding-reliability design. Instead, it relied on transparency of analytical decisions, consistency of conceptual thresholds, and examination of contradictory evidence. The study also did not conduct a psychological diagnosis of the characters, establish clinical levels of differentiation, and draw causal conclusions about suicide, mental disorder, or the actual psychological functioning of the Von Erich family. This study did not involve human participants, interviews, surveys, or the collection of personal data.

4. Results

High-threshold screening of 43 provisional Relational Episodes, followed by cross-episode synthesis of episodes that met analytical criteria, resulted in four higher-order patterns regarding how The Iron Claw represents family anxiety as a relational process.

Table 1. Bowen Concept Screening Outcomes

Bowen concept	Status	Primary analytical role / rationale
Nuclear Family Emotional Process	Accept	Family-level organization of anxiety
Family Projection Process	Accept	Focused concern and replacement pressure, strongest around Mike
Triangles	Accept	Redistribution of dyadic tension through a third party
Differentiation of Self	Accept	Kevin's uneven self-position under family pressure
Multigenerational Transmission Process	Accept	Continuity and modification across generational positions
Emotional Cutoff	Hold	Distancing evidence not quite specific
Sibling Position	Reject	Ranking better explained by performance and favoritism
Societal Emotional Process	Reject	Wider societal mechanism not sufficiently demonstrated

4.1. Protection through Performance: Strength, Success, and Ranked Family Position

The first pattern shows that the film connects family security with the ability to be strong, successful, and independent. This relational logic is established early on when Fritz responds to Doris's concerns about the family's material condition with the belief that threats can only be faced by being "the strongest," "the most successful," and "the absolute best," and by "relying on no one but ourselves" (The Iron Claw, 00:04:36-00:04:45). Strength in this sequence functions not only as an athletic quality, but as a response to vulnerability.

The same logic is then applied to children. In the breakfast sequence, Fritz arranges Kerry, Kevin, David, and Mike in a hierarchy of preference and states that "the rankings can always change" and that each child can move up or down (The Iron Claw, 00:10:31-00:10:40). Approval and family position are therefore represented as conditions that can change through performance. In the Nuclear Family Emotional Process, the evaluation of a child does not stop at an individual assessment because each child's position acquires meaning relative to other siblings.

A similar mechanism emerges when the championship opportunity is given to Kevin. The opportunity is not framed as an individual professional achievement, but as something that can bring the championship "home for us." A member's achievement achieves family-level functioning and becomes part of an aspiration larger than himself. This pattern then takes on a more intense emotional form after David's death. In the funeral sequence, Fritz demands that family members not hide, stating, "I don't want to see any tears" (The Iron Claw, 01:07:24-01:07:36). Strength-based family rule moves from physical performance to emotional regulation. Visually, the funeral sequence shows several family members with their heads bowed while Fritz's instruction not to cry dominates the interaction; the contrast between bodily grief and verbal demands for restraint reinforces the function of toughness as a rule of emotional regulation.

This shift demonstrates continuity in family emotional logic. Financial insecurity, professional competition, physical vulnerability, and bereavement are distinct situations, but the responses depicted in the film follow a similar trajectory: vulnerability is addressed through strength, achievement, restraint, and continuation. Thus, family anxiety is represented through a performance-based logic of protection, which links security to strength, success, emotional control, and relative position within the family.

4.2. Redistribution Anxiety: Comparison, Replacement, and Sibling Role Reallocation

The second finding suggests that family anxiety is not solely concentrated within the Fritz-child dyad, but can also shift through comparisons and changing roles between siblings. One early configuration is seen when Kevin experiences uncertainty after his performance, and David intervenes to explain Fritz's response. David suggests that Fritz is "downplaying it" to discourage Kevin from getting his hopes up, then asserts that Kevin performed exceptionally (The Iron Claw, 00:36:21-00:36:27). The Fritz-Kevin tension thus spills over into the sibling relationship, while David acts as an intermediary, interpreting and helping to defuse Kevin's response. This configuration fulfills a more powerful triangular function than the mere presence of three family members. Visually, David sits close to Kevin in the back room immediately after Fritz's evaluation, so the intermediary function emerges not only from speech but also from the shift in interaction to a more intimate sibling space.

The comparison becomes clearer when David receives a championship opportunity. Fritz directs David not to use Kevin as a reference point when accepting the opportunity. The opportunity received by one of the children already has relational meaning for the other siblings even before open conflict occurs. After David's death, the family's anxiety then experiences a reallocation of roles. Fritz immediately connects the response to adversity with the vacant championship opportunity and opens up the possibility of one of the siblings "wrestling in his place" (The Iron Claw, 01:10:16-01:10:36). Loss and performance continuity are placed in the same relational sequence.

The pressure of replacement becomes most explicit in Mike. After a medical crisis and the pressure to return as a wrestler, Mike tells Doris, "I'm not David," adding that "Everybody wants me to be David" and that he cannot replace his brother (The Iron Claw, 01:27:24-01:27:40). This sequence demonstrates that anxiety surrounding David's loss becomes concentrated on Mike's ability to fulfill a role perceived as empty. Within the Family Projection Process framework, Mike is the member most consistently receiving focused concern about perceived insufficiency and the need for corrective functioning.

However, the film also presents negative cases that limit this interpretation. The siblings repeatedly demonstrate care, protection, reconciliation, and a desire to maintain connection. When Kerry is in acute crisis and says she needs someone and a family, Kevin immediately replies, "Stay with us" (The Iron Claw, 01:51:38-01:51:49). Comparison and role replacement, therefore, do not erase sibling attachment. Instead, the film shows the tension between performance-based family positioning and the affection that remains strong between the siblings.

4.3. Differentiation as an Uneven Relational Shift

The third finding relates to changes in Kevin's relational position. The data do not show a linear progression from obedience to independence. Instead, Kevin gradually established a more detached position from Fritz's family project, but continued to exhibit episodes of intense emotional reactivity when anxiety increased.

In the early stages, Kevin's focus is still heavily tied to his father's approval. He responds to the championship opportunity with a desire to make Fritz proud, while Fritz quickly positions the opportunity within his aspiration for a family championship. This episode serves as a baseline for the subsequent trajectory. The first shift is evident in Kevin's conversation with David, when Kevin states that he would "be pretty happy to focus on my family" (The Iron Claw, 01:03:45-01:03:54). The referent "family" begins to shift from his family of origin to the subsystem he and Pam built.

This self-position becomes more explicit when Kevin comes into conflict with Fritz over his business and household needs. Under pressure from Fritz, Kevin says, "I need to think about my family, Dad," then connects it to his financial situation and household needs (The

Iron Claw, 01:46:14-01:46:25). The significance of this is not simply a disagreement. Kevin is able to articulate reasons stemming from his self-defined responsibilities and defend that position when relational pressure mounts.

However, this trajectory is not linear. After a series of losses, Kevin distances himself from Pam and the child for fear that they will also be subjected to the "curse." He states, "I don't want you guys to catch it" (The Iron Claw, 01:33:32-01:33:43). This distancing does not meet the Emotional Cutoff threshold because the evidence strongly points to grief-driven protective avoidance rather than unresolved attachment tension with Pam. However, the episode provides important counter-evidence to the successful differentiation reading. Visually, Pam continues to hold the baby while Kevin stands apart facing them; this spatial separation supports the protective distancing reading without necessitating the Emotional Cutoff label.

Thus, Kevin demonstrates a growing capacity to maintain self-position amidst family pressure, but this capacity remains uneven and vulnerable as family anxiety increases. This change is more accurately described as an uneven relational shift than a heroic escape or completed differentiation.

4.4. Transmission without Simple Repetition: Inherited Emotional Rules and Their Modification

Recent findings suggest that multigenerational processes operate through continuity in emotional rules without exact repetition. Family rules are most clearly established through the association between vulnerability and danger. Fritz places survival on strength, success, self-reliance, and then the suppression of grief. These rules don't completely disappear when Kevin becomes a father.

Before the final sequence, anxiety about family history had already influenced Kevin's decisions as a parent. He chose to use the surname Adkisson for his son because it would make him "feel safer," despite Pam's reminder that a child's safety does not depend on a family name (The Iron Claw, 01:17:03-01:17:13). The attempt to create symbolic distance from the Von Erich identity was thus still shaped by anxiety stemming from family history.

Continuity becomes most evident at the ending. When Kevin cries in front of his children, his first verbal response is, "A man doesn't cry" (The Iron Claw, 02:02:55-02:03:05). The emotional rule of male restraint previously represented through Fritz remains present in Kevin's vocabulary when he himself is in the paternal position. However, the sequence does not end with an identical reproduction. Kevin's children respond, "It's okay, Dad. You can cry. Everyone cries," and continue to provide physical and emotional comfort. Visually, both children remain very close to Kevin's side as he cries, so the modification is marked not only by dialogue but also by continued physical proximity rather than withdrawal.

The change becomes even more apparent when Kevin expresses grief over the loss of his identity as a brother. Kevin's children respond, "We'll be your brothers, Dad," and Kevin accepts the reassurance (The Iron Claw, 02:03:32-02:03:46). Vulnerability is not followed by a demand for strength again, but by continued connection. This intergenerational sequence provides the strongest evidence for the Multigenerational Transmission Process. What is transmitted is not a deterministic tragedy, but rather an emotional rule about how vulnerability should be handled. The rule reappears in Kevin, but a different relational response changes how the pattern is reproduced.

Therefore, the film represents the intergenerational trajectory as continuity followed by modification, not complete discontinuity. Kevin still carries the language and sensitivities of the emotional system of the family in which he was raised, but the family subsystem he built does not respond to vulnerability in the same way.

Taken together, the four findings indicate that family anxiety is represented as a pattern organized through performance and comparison, distributed through shifting family relationships and roles, negotiated through Kevin's uneven differentiation, and carried across generational positions without exact repetition. Of Bowen's eight refined concepts, five received adequate analytical support, while Emotional Cutoff, Sibling Position, and Societal Emotional Process did not meet the threshold for core findings.

5. Discussion

Research findings show that The Iron Claw not only represents suffering resulting from authoritarian fatherhood or the demands of masculinity, but also shows how this pressure circulates through other relationships within the family's emotional system. Anxiety moves through performance expectations, comparison, shifting roles, emotional restraint, and family members' responses to each other. This perspective broadens the film's reading from the question of who oppresses whom to how a family organizes itself under sustained anxiety.

5.1. Family Anxiety as Relational Organization Rather than Individual Pathology

The first finding suggests that chronic anxiety in families is not primarily expressed through individual anxiety symptoms. Anxiety takes form through recurring relational rules regarding strength, success, approval, emotional restraint, and the ability to continue functioning after adversity. This reading aligns with (Bowen, 1978), (Kerr & Bowen, 1988), (Brown, 1999), and (Papero, 2014, 2017, 2024), who position emotional interdependence and anxiety as important forces within the family system.

In the film, financial insecurity, professional competition, physical vulnerability, and bereavement are all different situations, but all tend to be responded to through demands to become stronger, more successful, and more emotionally controlled. This pattern explains why the Nuclear Family Emotional Process is one of the most powerful mechanisms in the corpus. What matters is not that each member reacts the same, but that changes in functioning in one member repeatedly result in adjustments in other relationships.

This position also prevents character diagnosis. (Brown & Errington, 2024) emphasize that Bowen's theory focuses on a person's functioning within a relationship system, not simply the categorization of traits. Therefore, the research results do not indicate that Fritz, Kevin, or the children "have" a particular psychological condition. What the film shows is a recurring relational pattern of how families change when stress increases.

5.2. From Patriarchal Power to Emotional-System Circulation

These findings expand but do not contradict previous studies. (Mirza, 2024) emphasized parental expectations, toxic masculinity, conditional approval, and competition, while still noting strong sibling attachment. (Muharamah & Afifulloh, 2026) demonstrated how patriarchal authority, bodily discipline, achievement, masculinity, and family loyalty operate as part of disciplinary power. (Auzan, 2024) also demonstrated the importance of masculine constructions in film.

The difference in BFST lies in the level of inquiry. Foucauldian analysis explains how authority is produced and how children are led to internalize discipline and masculine norms. Bowenian analysis adds questions about what happens after this pressure becomes part of the family's emotional system. In this research data, paternal evaluation does not stop at the Fritz-child dyad. Evaluation of Kevin influences David; David's opportunity changes Kevin's relational position; David's loss shifts expectations toward other siblings; and Mike explicitly feels pressure to become David's replacement.

Thus, the effects of patriarchal authority in the film are not only vertical, from father to son, but also systemic, as the tension it generates can be transferred through sibling comparison, triangular configuration, and role redistribution. Masculinity can explain the cultural content of certain emotional rules, while Bowen helps explain their relational circulation and modification.

5.3. Performance as a Family Anxiety-Regulation Strategy

Wrestling in the film isn't adequately understood as a professional setting. Performance becomes one way the family system responds to vulnerability. Fritz links safety with strength and success, then organizes approval through ranking and achievement. After a loss, the same logic resurfaces in the demand to continue functioning and maintain continuity through the remaining members.

This reading does not claim that competition causes tragedy. Films address other factors such as illness, grief, professional pressure, and individual circumstances. However, performance repeatedly serves as a medium through which family anxiety is managed.

Achievement can reduce uncertainty and gain approval; impaired functioning gives rise to focused concern; and an empty role triggers the possibility of redistribution.

These findings also explain the coexistence of competition and sibling attachment. (Mirza, 2024) noted manufactured competition for paternal love as well as strong bonds between siblings. Within the same system, siblings can serve as relational reference points for performance and the strongest source of support for each other. Negative cases of sibling care are therefore important because they prevent the sibling system from becoming competitive hostility.

The Family Projection Process must also be understood selectively. General parental pressure does not automatically constitute projection. The evidence becomes stronger when Mike's perceived insufficiency is accompanied by focused correction, fighter identity, and explicit replacement pressure. Alternative explanations such as authoritarian parenting, wrestling demands, and grief remain relevant, so FPP functions as a contributing explanation rather than a total explanation.

5.4. Differentiation without a Heroic Escape Narrative

Kevin's relational development complicates the binary opposition between dependence and independence. His ability to articulate responsibility toward Pam and the children resembles Bowen's emphasis on self-position under relational pressure, rather than simply separation. Empirical work on differentiation also links lower emotional reactivity and self-position capacity with more adaptive relational functioning, although differentiation remains a complex and contextual construct (Calatrava et al., 2022; Miller et al., 2004; Skowron & Friedlander, 1998; Skowron & Schmitt, 2003).

In the film, Kevin becomes increasingly able to determine responsibilities that do not entirely follow Fritz's agenda. However, Pam's anxiety-driven distancing after a series of losses suggests that this capacity remains context-sensitive. Thus, Kevin's change is more accurately read as an uneven relational process than a completed state. These findings also align with cross-cultural work that positions differentiation in relation to family functioning, mental health, and relationship satisfaction without equating it with emotional isolation (Aditya et al., 2022; Claudia et al., 2025; Kim et al., 2014; Lee & Johnson, 2017; Piteo & MacKay, 2021; Siregar & Aditya, 2024).

5.5. Multigenerational Transmission as Modification, Not Determinism

The most important finding for the article's argument is that the Multigenerational Transmission Process is not represented as an exact repetition. (Józefczyk, 2023) shows that the transmission of differentiation is a complex process and cannot be reduced to simple one-to-one inheritance. (Calatrava et al., 2022) also caution that intergenerational transmission still requires more longitudinal evidence.

The film data offers a consistent representation of this complexity. The rule of emotional restraint is established through Fritz and then continues to emerge when Kevin becomes a father. If the analysis stops at the sentence "A man doesn't cry," the ending could be read as a straightforward repetition. However, the children respond by normalizing crying, remaining connected, and not accepting the prohibition as a rule to be obeyed. Kevin also receives comfort, so continuity lies in the availability of the inherited rule, while modification emerges through different relational responses.

Interestingly, this interpretation is not entirely identical to (Durkin, 2024) framing of the film's ending. Durkin portrays Kevin as the figure who ultimately breaks the family curse. This study does not reject this narrative intention, but the final interaction between Kevin and his children complicates the reading of complete rupture. Kevin continues to reproduce the prohibition against crying before the children offer a different response. From Bowen's perspective, this sequence more strongly demonstrates the continuity of the emotional rule along with modifications in its relational reception rather than total discontinuity.

This distinction is crucial to the use of the word "inherited" in the title. Inheritance isn't used in a genetic, supernatural, or deterministic way to convey trauma. What's "inherited" in the film's representation is the emotional language and relational responses available when vulnerability arises. Patterns can persist, but they don't necessarily produce identical outcomes.

This reading also clarifies the relationship between continuity and agency in the film's representation. BFST does not require family patterns to be understood as destiny; instead, attention to differentiation and relationship processes allows change to occur without presuming a complete liberation from the family's previous emotional system. For Kevin, change does not occur through the complete erasure of the language of strength he learned, but through the emergence of a relational configuration that allows vulnerability to elicit a different response. This explains why the film's ending can still be read as a meaningful change while not necessarily being claimed as a complete rupture. Interpretatively, this position provides a stronger nuance than the two extremes: reading Kevin as a passive victim of inherited patterns or as an individual who has completely escaped the family system. The film instead shows that inherited emotional rules can remain present in a person's speech and reactivity while losing some of their regulative power when the relationships around them change.

5.6. The "Curse" and the Study's Theoretical Contribution

The motif of the family curse provides an important contrast to the systemic reading. In the film, the curse is a narrative explanation used by characters to give meaning to repeated tragedies. This study does not interpret the curse as a direct synonym for Bowenian chronic anxiety. The two exist at different analytical levels: the curse is an explanation within the story world, while BFST is an external analytical framework for exploring recurring relational responses to threat and loss.

This separation prevents the analysis from replacing one deterministic explanation with another. Films can show characters understanding suffering through curse discourse while simultaneously demonstrating recurring patterns of strength, comparison, restraint, projection, and reactivity. The research's theoretical contribution therefore lies in shifting from individual pathology and vertical domination to relational circulation and modification.

The methodological contribution is also evident in the selective use of BFST. Of the eight concepts screened, only five received sufficiently strong evidence. Theory-blind extraction, high-threshold screening, alternative-explanation testing, and negative-case analysis allowed Emotional Cutoff, Sibling Position, and Societal Emotional Process to be unforced into findings. Overall, The Iron Claw demonstrates a family emotional system that continually adapts to stress: anxiety is represented and organized through performance expectations, transferred through relationships, carried over to the next family subsystem, and modified as relational responses change. Multigenerational continuity is therefore not destiny, but rather a relational pattern whose repetition remains possible but whose form is not fixed.

6. Conclusion

This research demonstrates that The Iron Claw represents family anxiety as a relational and multigenerational process, not as an experience confined to individual characters. Strength, success, comparison, emotional restraint, and shifting family roles form recurring patterns through which the family's emotional system responds to threat, loss, and vulnerability. Thus, the film not only depicts authoritarian fatherhood or masculine oppression, but also shows how this oppression moves through relationships and affects the functioning of other family members.

Of Bowen's eight concepts used in the screening phase, five received adequate analytical support: Nuclear Family Emotional Process, Family Projection Process, Triangles, Differentiation of Self, and Multigenerational Transmission Process. The Nuclear Family Emotional Process serves as the backbone because anxiety is repeatedly organized through performance, ranking, emotional restraint, and adjustment to changes in member functioning. Triangles and the Family Projection Process emerge in more specific configurations, particularly when paternal evaluation moves through sibling relationships and when focused expectations are concentrated on Mike. Differentiation of Self is most clearly seen in Kevin's changing relational position, but the change is not linear and remains vulnerable to heightened anxiety.

In the multigenerational dimension, the film does not represent transmission as deterministic inheritance or simple repetition. The emotional rules associated with Fritz, particularly the relationship between strength and suppression of vulnerability, still emerge

when Kevin is in the paternal position. However, the children respond to these rules differently, and Kevin accepts the connection offered. The most appropriate change, therefore, is not a complete discontinuity or cycle breaking, but rather continuity accompanied by modification. Old patterns may still emerge, but their forms and consequences do not have to be identical when relational responses change.

Theoretically, this research expands on previous studies of The Iron Claw, which have focused primarily on masculinity, parental expectations, patriarchal authority, and disciplinary power. Bowen's approach demonstrates that pressure operates not only vertically from father to son but also circulates through comparison, sibling relationships, role redistribution, and family subsystems across generations. Methodologically, the research demonstrates the value of theory-blind relational extraction, high-threshold coding, alternative-explanation testing, negative-case analysis, and audiovisual verification in applying family systems theory to fictional works.

The study has several limitations. The analysis focused on a single film, so the findings are not intended to be generalized to all family representations in sports cinema. The Iron Claw is also a dramatized representation of a historical family, so the study makes no claims regarding the actual psychological functioning of the Von Erich family. Furthermore, the qualitative audiovisual analysis remains interpretive, although it is strengthened through recurrence checking, audiovisual verification, and the examination of negative cases. Future studies could expand this approach through comparative analysis of other family dramas or sports films, as well as examining how family emotional processes are represented in different cultural contexts, gender expectations, and family structures.

Thus, The Iron Claw demonstrates that what appears to be a family "inheritance" need not be understood as destiny. Relational patterns may persist across generations, but their forms of reproduction are not fixed and can change when faced with different relational responses.

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