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Effects of peer relationships on parent–youth relationships and self-differentiation

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ABSTRACT

We aimed to explore how romantic relationship status affects the moderating effect of peer relationships on associations between parent–youth relationships and Self-differentiation. Chinese college students (N=389) completed measures to assess the Self-differentiation, parent–youth relationships, peer relationships, and romantic relationships. Results revealed that the interaction effect between peer discord and father–youth discord was not significant for romantically involved participants (γ=0.22, SE=0.02, p=0.13), while the interaction effect between peer discord and father–youth discord was significant for single participants (γ=0.20, SE=0.01, p<0.05). In other words, the protective effect of peer relationships on the associations between parent–youth relationships and differentiation of self was effective only for single participants. The theoretical and practical implications of these findings are discussed.

Keywords:
self-differentiation; parent-young relationships; peer relationships; romantic relationships; moderating effect

1.Introduction

Self-differentiation, a core concept introduced in Bowen's family systems theory, is defined as the degree to which an individual is independent from or emotionally attached to his or her family members or significant others (Bowen,1980). The definition covers two aspects: the intra-personal, or the capacity to distinguish the thinking and feeling systems, and the interpersonal, or the ability to preserve autonomy within the context of deep intimacy with significant others (Bowen,1980). Thus, greater differentiation involves the ability to engage in logical reasoning with thoughtful examination of the circumstances, and the ability to modulate strong emotions under pressure. Furthermore, Bowen (1980) stated that individuals with greater self-differentiation would not be overly dependent upon or emotionally cutoff from parents and significant others. The level of differentiation correlates directly with psychosocial development in young adults, including well-being, emotional regulation, competence, and adaptive ability (Skowron, 2004; Skowron, Holmes, & Sabatelli, 2013). Bowen suggested that an individual's relationship with his or her parents is at the core of self-differentiation, and that the basic level of differentiation is largely determined by how well an individual emotionally separates from his or her family of origin. A growing number of studies reveal that the parent–youth relationship, as one of the most basic and important of all family relationships, has an enormous influence on the physical and mental development of adolescents and young adults. For example, individuals with secure parental attachment, who experienced responsive parenting, and who have less

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involved or less-interfering mothers tend to successfully differentiate from their families of origin, thereby achieving a higher level of self-differentiation (Kere, 1981; Barber, 2005).

In recent years, Bronfenbrenner's ecosystem theory has received increased attention, resulting in greater emphasis on the systematic effects of each individual's environmental and interpersonal contexts. In addition to the influence of the parent–youth relationship, peer relationships are also closely associated with self-differentiation (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Several studies show that peer relationships can help individuals separate from their families of origin, enabling smooth completion of the individuation process (Seiffge-Krenke, 2006), and can help individuals develop the ability to regulate emotions appropriately (Boykin, Allen, Claire, & Hare, 2009). From adolescence onwards，adolescents spend more time with their peers than their parents (Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 2008). Study taking college students as samples showed that the discord with parents was more frequent than discord with friends(Moilanen & Raffaelli, 2010). However, peers provide unique and increasingly powerful forms of socialization over the course of adolescence (Brown & Larson, 2009). Furthermore, positive peer experiences thought to potentially buffer the effects of poor parent–youth relationships. For example, excessive interference from the father has a smaller effect on emotional regulation in individuals with positive peer relationships than individuals with poor peer relationships (Peng et al., 2013). Another important developmental task during adolescence and early adulthood is the development of romantic relationships (Herzog & Hill-Chapman, 2013). In fact, dating and romantic relationships have been described as arenas in which autonomous behaviors can be enacted and supported. For example, emerging adults with more support from a romantic partner tend to report greater independence from parents and more authentic self-expression (Melanie et al., 2011). Furthermore, romantic support can not only significantly predict the level of self-differentiation, but can also weaken the negative influence that low levels of responsive parenting have on self-differentiation (Freeman & Almond, 2009).

However, the peer experiences of single participants differ from those in a romantic relationship, especially in early adulthood, since the romantic relationships which main purpose is to accompany in early adolescence do not achieve their full function until early adulthood (Furman & Wehner, 1994). According to the interdependence theory，an individual keeps close company with his or her romantic partner at the expense of existing relationships because of limited resources (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Furthermore, empirical findings suggest that the development of romantic relationships may change the peer network. For instance, young people in a romantic relationship report spending an increased amount of time and energy interacting with their romantic partners and a decreased amount of time interacting with their peers. It is easier for single individuals to obtain greater support from their peers and have less discord within their friendships (Jennifer, 2012). More specifically, romantic partners begin to surpass parents and peers as the primary source of support during early adulthood (Seiffge-Krenke, 2003; Connolly, Furman, & Konarski, 2000). From the perspective of attachment figures, single young adults have friends, parents, and siblings as their attachment figures. However, young adults in a romantic relationship preferred their romantic partners over friends; hence, the romantic partner is particularly important for those in a romantic relationship. It is plausible to assume that the moderating effect of peer relationships on the association between parent–youth relationships and self-differentiation may be weaker in individuals in romantic relationshipsbecause of the declining importance and increasingly negative features of peer relationships for these individuals.

The concept of self-differentiation was derived in Western countries, which advocate independence and autonomy in the context of individualism. However, in China, the idea of separation from the family is not generally supported. In Chinese family culture, the psychological feelings of individuals always keep bond with their families throughout their lives. Cross-cultural studies show that parents of adolescents in Chinese societies tend to report lower support for autonomy and a greater degree of psychological control than parents in Western societies (Lekes et al., 2010). Given the importance of filial piety in China, there may be a greater focus on the concept of young people fulfilling their responsibilities to their parents (Pomerantz, Qin, Wang, & Chen, 2011). Consequently, it is possible that Chinese adolescents pay more attention to the connection with their parents, and tend to be oriented more toward compliance and authority (Smetana, Wong, Ball, & Yau, 2014). In contrast, Blos (1979) stressed that teenagers need to remove their family dependence to develop into independent individuals in the adult world. Despite these differences between Eastern and Western cultures, it is important for Chinese young adults to experience independent feelings while maintaining an emotional bond with their families. In traditional Chinese culture "severe father and

kind mother", the father and mother have different roles in educating and establishing relationships with their children, with mothers reported to show excessive protection and higher levels of emotional warmth than the father (Ren, 2014). Similarly, adolescents in mainland China rated their fathers higher for strictness of punishment and their mothers higher for warmth and love (Liu et al., 2013). Existing studies may have overgeneralized the effect of parent–youth relationships on self-differentiation, and it appears that no study has examined the independent effects of the mother and the father on self-differentiation.

As described, parent–youth relationships are one of the most dominant determinant of self-differentiation. Positive parent–youth relationships contribute to develop a higher level of self-differentiation. According to Bronfenbrenner's ecosystem theory, except that parent–youth relationships are one of microsystems under the environment of growth, peer relationships are another microsystem. Interactions between these microsystems typically influence many important aspects of individual developmental outcomes. Thus, we propose that the interaction between parent–youth relationships and peer relationships will affect the level of self-differentiation. Specifically, positive peer relationships can buffer the negative effect of negative parent–youth relationships on individual development. We expect that the relationship between negative parent–youth relationships and self-differentiation will be weaker in groups with positive peer relationships. Besides, the development of romantic relationships may change the peer network. Generally speaking, it is easier for single individuals to obtain greater support from their peers and have less discord within their friendships (Jennifer, 2012). Furthermore, romantically involved youth whose attachment needs from their parents are not met may be likely to consider romantic partners as an alternative source of social and emotional support, rather than peers (Furman & Simon, 2006). Accordingly, the moderating effect of peer relationships on the association between parent-youth relationships will be shrinking. Under the influence of traditional Chinese family culture, however, the father and mother have different roles and effects during the growth of their children. Investigating the independent effects of the mother and the father on self-differentiation is an important perspective in our study. Therefore, we proposed the following hypotheses:

H1: Peer relationships moderate the relationship between father–youth relationships/ mother–youth relationships and self-differentiation: The positive relationship will be stronger when peer relationships are negative.

H2: Romantic relationship status influences the moderating effect of peer relationships. Specifically, the moderating role of peer relationships on the association between father–youth/mother–youth relationships and self-differentiation is proposed to be statistically significant only for romantically uninvolved participants and not for romantically involved participants.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Overall, 389 undergraduates were randomly chosen from 5 classes at a large university located in Northwestern China. We contacted with the teachers of those classes in advance, making sure that we could take 15 minutes to investigate those students during the class. The mean age of the sample was 20.45 (SD=1.63).The final sample included 203 males and 181 females. Five participants did not report their gender, 96 were freshmen, 105 were sophomores, 113 were junior students, and 70 were senior students. Furthermore, 5 participants did not report their grade level, 116 participants were in romantic relationship, and 273 were not involved in a romantic relationship. All participants signed a written consent form. Participation was anonymous, and participants were assured of the confidentiality of their responses.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Differentiation of Self Inventory (DSI). DSI was used to assess self-differentiation (Skowron & Schmitt, 2003). The Chinese version of DSI was adapted by Wu and Wang (2010). This scale consists of 27 items and includes four different subscales, Emotional Reactivity, "I"Position, Emotional Cutoff, and Fusion with Others. For each statement, participants were asked to rate how they generally feel on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from "not at all true of me (1)" to "very true of me (6)", with higher scores indicating a greater

level of differentiation. The full-scale in this current study had a good internal consistency (α=0.90) , and the four subscales used in this study showed good reliability, ranging from 0.69 to 0.82.

2.2.2. Network of Relationships Inventory: Relationship Qualities Version (NRI-RQV). The relationships with mother, father, peers, and current romantic partner were assessed using the NRI-RQV (Buhrmester & Furman, 2008). The Chinese version of NRI-RQV was adapted by Kong (2012). This 30-item questionnaire measures five positive relationship features (companionship, disclosure, emotional support, approval, and satisfaction) and five negative features (conflict, criticism, dominance, pressure, and exclusion), which are aggregated into two composite scores, closeness and discord. The participants rated how much of each quality they experienced in the relationship with each person, ranging from "little or none (1)" to "the most (5)", with higher composite scores indicating a higher level of closeness or discord. In this study, Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was used to ensure the reliability and validity of these four questionnaires for Chinese undergraduates. The results indicated an acceptable fit of the four questionnaires: Father–youth Relationship Quality (RMSEA=0.07;AGFI=0.81;GFI=0.85;NFI=0.82); Mother–youth Relationship Quality (RMSEA=0.07;AGFI=0.80;GFI=0.85;NFI=0.82); Peer Relationship Quality (RMSEA=0.05;AGFI=0.86;GFI=0.89;NFI=0.84); and Romantic Relationship Quality (RMSEA=0.07;AGFI=0.82;GFI=0.84;NFI=0.83). These four questionnaires in the study showed good the internal consistency reliability coefficients for closeness (range from 0.91 to 0.93) and discord (range from 0.80 to 0.83).

2.2.3. Romantic status. Participants were asked "Do you currently have a boy/girlfriend?" on their questionnaires. Participants were considered as currently being in a romantic relationship if they answered "Yes", regardless of relationship duration.

2.3. Statistical analysis

The data analyses were performed using SPSS 19.0. The participants whose questionnaires contained missing values were excluded from the final database. Confirmative Factor Analysis (CFA) was used to assure the reliability and validity of the revised Relationship Quality Version for Chinese undergraduates. The relationships among father–youth relationships, mother–youth relationships, and peer relationships were tested using Pearson correlation analysis and regression analyses. How romantic relationship status affects the moderating effect of peer discord on associations between father–youth discord and self-differentiation were assessed using Amos 21.0.

3. Results

3.1. Correlations among variables

Table 1 presents the bivariate Pearson correlations between the main study variables and self-differentiation for romantically uninvolved and romantically involved participants. For both groups, significant positive correlations were found between self-differentiation and father–youth closeness/mother–youth closeness (correlation coefficients ranging from 0.12 to 0.24). However, the correlation between self-differentiation and peer closeness was significant only among romantically uninvolved participants. Significant negative correlations between self-differentiation and father–youth discord, mother–youth discord, and peer discord were found for both groups. We subsequently examined the role of romantic relationship status in the correlations between self-differentiation and father–youth relationships, mother–youth relationships, and peer relationships. We found a significant effect of romantic relationship status in relation to peer discord (Z=1.90, p<0.10). The correlation between self-differentiation and peer discord was weaker for romantically uninvolved participants than for romantically involved participants.

Table 1. Correlations between variables and self-differentiation for romantically uninvolved and romantically involved participants

Variable	Relationship status		Z
	Involved（n=273）	Involved（n=116）	
father-youth closeness	0.14*	0.24*	-1.00
father-youth discord	-0.26*	-0.27*	0.09
mother-youth closeness	0.12†	0.20†	-0.82
mother-youth discord	-0.25*	-0.35*	1.00
peer closeness	0.19*	0.08	-0.73
peer discord	-0.18*	-0.37*	1.90†

Note. N=389.†p <0.10;*p ＜ 0.05.

3.2. Regression analyses for variables predicting self-differentiation

Linear regression was conducted to investigate how well peer relationships and romantic relationships predicted self-differentiation. As shown in Table 2, the results revealed that the predictive ability of romantic discord for self-differentiation was stronger than that of peer discord. Furthermore, romantic closeness significantly predicted self-differentiation, whereas peer closeness did not. These results indicate that romantic relationships predicted self-differentiation better than peer relationships.

Table 2. Regression analyses for variables predicting self-differentiation

Predictor	R^2	ΔR^2	Standardized coefficient β	T
peer discord	0.14	0.14	-0.23	-2.25*
peer closeness	0.14	0.01	-0.05	-0.47
romantic discord	0.18	0.04	-0.24	-2.40*
romantic closeness	0.20	0.03	0.19	2.00*

*Note. N=389.** p ＜0.05.

3.3. Romantic relationship status affects the moderating role of peer relationships

Multiple-group confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to investigate whether romantic involvement affected the moderating role of peer relationships on the association between parent–youth relationships and self-differentiation. Because father–youth relationships, mother–youth relationships, and peer relationships were each assessed via two composite scores (closeness and discord), eight structural equation models were formed. These can be summarized as the moderating model of peer closeness (discord) on the associations between father–youth relationships and self-differentiation, and the moderating model of peer closeness (discord) on associations between mother–youth relationships and self-differentiation. The baseline multiple-group model (model 1) had no equality constraints on parameters across romantically uninvolved and romantically involved participants for each structural equation model.

Those models obtained an acceptable fit. The nested model (model 2) assumed that factor loadings were the same across romantically uninvolved and romantically involved participants for each structural equation model. The results showed significant interactions between peer discord and father–youth discord. Model 1 of the moderating effect of peer discord on associations between father–youth relationships and self-differentiation showed an acceptable fit (χ^2=426.25(170); GFI=088; CFI=0.89; AGFI=0.83; RMSEA=0.06). The difference between model 1 and model 2 was statistically significant ($\triangle\chi^2(14)$=37.38, p<0.01); no differences were found for the other seven structural equation models.

The standardized factor loadings for the structural equation model with unconstrained parameters showed that the interaction effect between peer discord and father–youth discord was not significant for romantically involved participants (γ=0.22, SE=0.02, p=0.13). However, the interaction effect between peer discord and father–youth discord was significant for romantically uninvolved participants (γ=0.20, SE=0.01, p<0.05), as illustrated by the structural equation model in Figure1.

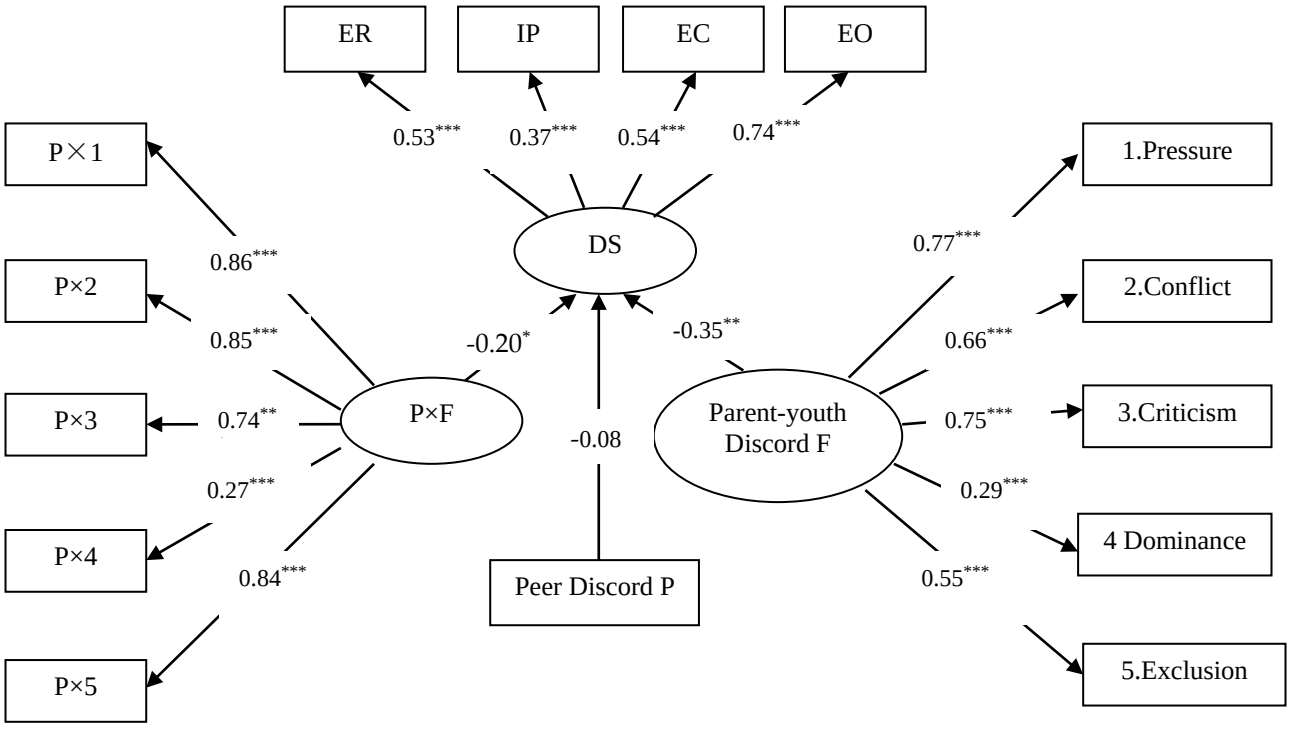

Figure 1. Moderating effect model of peer discord

Notes. ER= Emotional Reactivity; IP="I"Position; EC= Emotional Cutoff; EO= Fusion with Others; DS= self-differentiation. N=389.

** p ＜0.05; ** p ＜0.10; ***p ＜0.001.*

4. Discussion

In this study, we investigated the relationship between self-differentiation and peer relationships among romantically uninvolved and romantically involved participants. The results showed that the correlation between self-differentiation and peer closeness was significant for romantically uninvolved participants but was not significant for romantically involved participants. This suggested that greater peer closeness was associated with greater self-differentiation among romantically uninvolved participants, whereas the level of self-differentiation did not increase as much with the level of peer closeness in romantically involved participants. This is presumably because undergraduates in romantic relationships spend more leisure time with and provide greater emotional support to their romantic partners, thereby impairing the function of peer closeness. The results also showed a significant negative correlation between self-differentiation and peer discord, and that this effect was stronger for romantically involved participants. This may be because peer discord was higher for romantically involved participants (Jennifer, 2012). The results further showed

that peer relationships were different for romantically uninvolved and romantically involved participants. Lastly, we used regression analyses to examine whether peer relationships and romantic relationships predicted self-differentiation. The results showed that romantic relationships had a greater effect on self-differentiation than peer relationships. Specifically, romantic discord had a greater effect on self-differentiation than peer discord and romantic closeness significantly predicted self-differentiation, whereas peer closeness did not. It appears that, in early adulthood, romantic relationships are not limited to the need for company, as peer relationships are, but also contain some of the attachment qualities of parent–youth relationships (Meeus et al., 2007). Thus, the results suggest that the effect of a romantic relationship is more important for those in such a relationship than peer relationships.

One of the main goals of our research was to investigate the moderating effect of peer relationships on the links between father–youth/ mother–youth relationships and self-differentiation. Consistent with the buffering hypothesis, peer discord appears to protect against risks associated with high levels of father–youth discord. Specifically, college students with lower levels of peer discord had weaker associations between father–youth discord and self-differentiation. This suggests that negative parent–youth relationships do not necessarily lead to low levels of self-differentiation, because the latter also depend on peer relationships. This may be because there are similarities between peer relationships and parent–youth relationships in terms of emotional support and instrumental help (Laible, Carlo, & Raffaelli, 2000). Furthermore, previous research showed that teenagers whose attachment needs were not met in their families are more likely to consider their peers a substitute for emotional support (Freeman & Almond, 2009). Thus, when one relationship is negative, another positive relationship can buffer and compensate for the adverse effects on individual development. However, peer relationships did not moderate the association between mother–youth relationships and self-differentiation, suggesting that the effects of father–youth relationships on individual development are different from those of mother–youth relationships, which may reflect the traditional Chinese culture of a "severe father" and "kind mother". Notably, a major goal of our study was to investigate whether romantic relationship status influenced the moderating effect of peer relationships, and this hypothesis was supported. The results showed that romantic relationship status significantly altered the moderating effect of peer discord on associations between father–youth discord and self-differentiation, suggesting that reduced peer discord functioned as a protective factor only for single college students. These findings verified the interdependence theory; namely, that the development of romantic relationships may affect peer relationships. Our results can be explained by the primary and secondary order of attachment objects. Specifically, after establishing a romantic relationship, the peer may become the secondary attachment object, and the romantic partner may turn into the main attachment object (Planitz, Feeney, & Peterson, 2009). Thus, the emotional support and need for company that characterize peer relationships may be replaced and impaired by romantic relationships, and the peer relationships may thereby fail to provide alternate resources when the parent–youth relationship is negative.

In regard to the implications of those findings, our results will assist educators, parents, and teachers with potential interventions designed to increase the levels of self-differentiation in Chinese college students. The influence of romantic relationship status on the moderating effect of peer relationships on associations between parent-youth relationships and self-differentiation suggests that an individual's interpersonal context should be considered when intervening in cases of low self- differentiation.

There are several limitations to this study. First, the same scale was used to measure parent–youth relationships, peer relationships, and romantic relationships. Although there is considerable overlap between the three types of relationship, many differences exist. For instance, only romantic relationships include sexual intercourse. Tools designed specifically for the different types of interpersonal relationship may be useful in future research. Second, the study participants did not include high-school students. Romantic relationships among high-school students may have distinguishing features. Future research could adopt an appropriate approach to explore these relevant questions in high-school students.

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